COMPACT SF

NEW WORLDS 3/6

Something drove the last survivors of Earth to seek disaster . . .

IN PASSAGE OF THE SUN

by George Collyn

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Guest Editorial

LA JETÉE: ACADEMY ONE

by J. G. BALLARD

THIS STRANGE AND poetic film, a fusion of science fiction, psychological fable and photo-montage, creates in its unique way a series of bizarre images of the inner landscapes of time. Apart from a brief three-second sequence —a young woman's hesitant smile, a moment of extraordinary poignancy, like a fragment of a child's dream— the thirty-minute film is composed entirely of still photographs. Yet this succession of disconnected images is a perfect means of projecting the quantified memories and movements through time that are the film's subject matter.

The jetty of the title is the main observation platform at Orly Airport. The long pier reaches out across the concrete no-man's land, the departure-point for other worlds. Giant jets rest on the apron beside the pier, metallic ciphers whose streamlining is a code for their passage through time. The light is powdery. The spectators on the observation platform have the appearance of mannequins. The hero is a small boy, visiting the airport with his parents. Suddenly there is a fragmented glimpse of a man falling. An accident has occurred, but while everyone is running to the dead man the small boy is looking instead at the face of a young woman by the rail. Something about this face, its expression of anxiety, regret and relief, and above all the obvious but unstated involvement of the young woman with the dead man, creates an image of extraordinary power in the boy's mind.

Years later, World War III breaks out. Paris is almost obliterated by an immense holocaust. A few survivors live on in the circular galleries below the Palais de Chaillot, like rats in some sort of abandoned test-maze warped out of

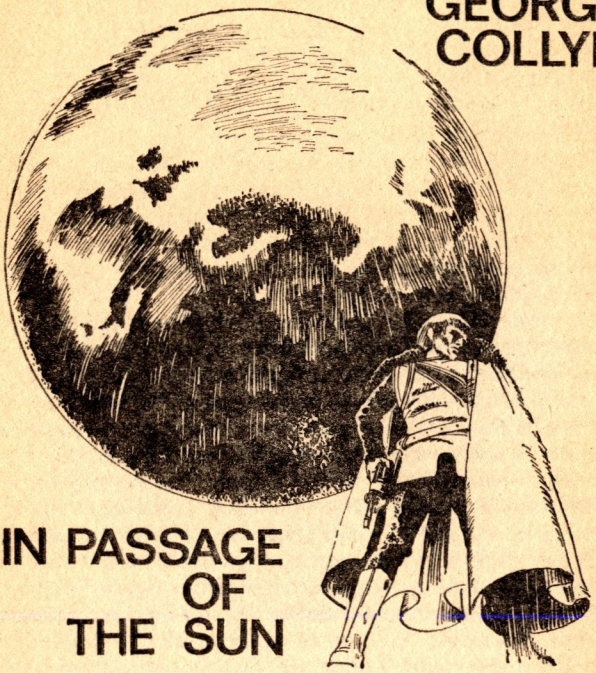
its normal time. The victors, distinguished by the strange eye-pieces they wear, begin to conduct a series of experiments on the survivors, among them the hero, now a man of about thirty. Faced with a destroyed world, the experimenters are hoping to send a man through time. They select the young man because of the powerful memory he carries of the pier at Orly. With luck he will home on to this. Other volunteers have gone insane, but the extraordinary strength of his memory carries him back to pre-war Paris. The sequence of images here is the most remarkable in the film, the subject lying in a hammock in the underground corridor as if waiting for some inward sun to rise, a bizarre surgical mask over his eyes—in my experience, the only convincing act of time travel in the whole of science fiction.

Arriving in Paris, he wanders among the strange crowds, unable to make contact with anyone until he meets the young woman he had seen as a child at Orly Airport. They fall in love, but their relationship is marred by his sense of isolation in time, his awareness that he has committed some kind of psychological crime in pursuing this memory. As if trying to place himself in time, he takes the young woman to museums of palaeontology, and they spend days among the fossil plants and animals. They visit Orly Airport, where he decides that he will not go back to the experimenters at Chaillot. At this moment three strange figures appear. Agents from an even more distant future, they are policing the time-ways, and have come to force him back. Rather than leave the young woman, he throws himself from the pier. The falling body is the one he glimpsed as a child.

This familiar theme is treated with remarkable finesse and imagination, its symbols and perspectives continually reinforcing the subject matter. Not once does it make use of the time-honoured conventions of traditional science fiction. Creating its own conventions from scratch, it triumphantly succeeds where science fiction invariably fails.

(Next month John Brunner reviews Godard's *Alphaville*)

GEORGE COLLYN



IN PASSAGE OF THE SUN

And what then have we lost?
In war, bitter war.
A burning home,
Our comrades' deaths,
In passage of the sun.

And what then have we gained?
In war, bitter war.
Shame, dishonour,
And a minstrel's song,
In passage of the sun.

one

YOU CAN HAVE no idea of what it was like in those last days on Earth. After ten years of war; with Earth finally besieged by the Throngi, the last vestiges of atmosphere had boiled, burnt off and dispersed into space. We, the survivors, huddled together in the few bubble-cities which remained. And there our life was turned into some nightmare vision of Hell.

The dense-packed crowds within the domes generated such heat that we could hardly bear a stitch of clothing on our backs and we were perpetually bathed in a sweat which evaporated almost before it had left our pores. Water, whether for drinking, washing or any other purpose, was rationed to three cups per person per day; food was almost as short; and the sewerage system had, to all intents and purposes, ceased to work. As a result, we were naked, filthy, hungry, thirsty, degraded and lost. And the smell? O Mother, how we stank!

Even when we were nearly overcome, suffocated in our own effluent, it was not possible to seek relief outside the dome. No-one could live outside without a space-suit and, in my city, we had thirteen hundred suits between forty thousand inhabitants. Also, we who lived in the midst of the city's stench for a period had grown to dislike but tolerate that stench. But anyone who breathed the pure oxygen of a suit-system for more than a few minutes had to re-accustom themselves to the stink on their return and more than one man had fainted dead away when the faceplate of his helmet had been removed.

After the April raids had destroyed one of the North American domes and, in pursuit of his defensive strategy, the king had recalled the Luna garrison; then we had to support a fresh influx of refugees and our conditions deteriorated still further. My room was twelve feet long by ten feet wide by eight feet high and I had to share it with fifteen other people. For most of the time the electricity failed and we were left for hours in the foetid, airless, simmering darkness. The surface of everything we touched was slimy with our own sweat and we were unable to move without colliding with another hot, clammy body. At night we slept sardine-fash-

ion, head to toe alternating, packed together and broiling in our own generated body-heat. We were men and women together and I have heard ignorant men snigger about this. But anyone who sees immorality in our actions can never have been forced to live as we did. Each man and woman was too weak, depressed and immersed in his or her own woes to spare any thought for the opposite sex. To me, the women who flanked me every night were no more than two factors contributing to my discomfort. Sex, modesty and morality were obsessions from a long-lost, long-dead, almost forgotten past.

I have heard those same cynical citizens of the Empire ask why we did not surrender if things were so bad. Such men can have no idea of the one bright spark of motivation which still burned within us all—our faith in our mission on Earth. One theme, part historical and part religious, ran through our schooling and dominated our thinking. We were told that the settlers who went to the Far Stars, our distant ancestors, had carried with them an idealised vision of that Mother Earth which had given them birth. But the Empire of Sirius, being so near and ruling the Earth, had forgotten, or grown contemptuous of that ideal. The result was the relatively easy seizure of the Solar System by the lizard-like Throngi, five hundred years ago. Even as we suffered in the domes we did not lose our pride in our immediate forefathers who, a hundred years before, had made the Great Pilgrimage from the Far Stars to Earth, driven out the Throngi, founded the Kingdom of Terra and built the Temple which was the shrine of humans throughout the galaxy. We worshipped Earth and we venerated our ancestors. Even at the height of our degradation we still gathered in the streets for morning service, to sing the old pilgrim songs and pray for the continuation of humanity's reign on Terra. For us it was a holy war.

Unfortunately, the Throngi believe that it was from Earth that the cosmic currents carried the spores of intelligent life to all quarters of the galaxy. Though their religion is different they hold Earth to be sacred, as we do, since it is the Fountain of Life. When they returned to the attack, ten years ago, it was a struggle in which matters of belief and principle collided. Neither side

would give or receive quarter; nor would either side admit defeat.

two

WHEN THE SIEGE entered its tenth month, nine weeks after we had taken in our quota of refugees, conditions entered into their lowest ebb. Our hair grew long and, becoming filthy and matted, formed weird Gorgon masks of greasy, snake-like locks, out of which suspicious eyes glared with an unnatural brightness. Starting rib-cages and pot-bellies attested to our malnutrition, as did arms and legs so thin that they could quite easily be encircled by finger and thumb. We had long since lost all semblance of civilisation in our appearance. Now, under the perpetual twilight of the dome's dimming lights, we seemed to be losing all traces of our individuality. First the differences between the age-groups blurred and became less apparent; then the differences between the sexes. Finally one ceased to notice any differences in height or build. It was as if we were each mirror-images, one of another. Mentally, too, we were sinking into the same common persona. We had stopped talking to one another and concerted action was carried on by means of some group instinct which gradually usurped the function of individual will or initiative. Time elongated itself into an arid desert, or became compressed into the passage of a blink. Actions taking less than a few minutes to perform seemed to fill days of our lives, while the events of days melted into the impression of a few seconds. The only thing which broke the monotony and prevented the trance from becoming a coma, was the daily act of worship. But that was a mutual emotional purging which merged the individual still further in the group. My memory of the time before I entered the city disappeared and with it my misery, since misery demands the memory of happiness to give it point.

Then the king's message came to shake us from our inertia.

three

WHEN THE VIEW-SCREENS lit up and the fanfare came from the speakers, it was so long since they had been in use

that few people realised what was happening. Some were so divorced from reality as to continue on their way as if nothing had happened, trapped in the daily routine. Others were terrified at the sudden noise and light and bolted for their homes under the impression that the Throngi were upon us. As for myself, the summons brought me to the surface as if, after months in free fall, I suddenly found the ground beneath my feet. Bemused, but fully aware, I stared up at the nearest view-screen, hanging from the underside of the dome. Without any announcement or warning, the king's face appeared.

King Asleck was little more than a boy. He had been only nine when he succeeded his father and he had been straightway plunged into the ten year war with Throngi. Never physically strong, it had been plain for some time that he was dying, killed by the strain and constant worry. Ill as he was however, he looked considerably better than we did. He was hollow-cheeked and sunken-eyed but he did not have the skeleton face and glittering eyes of the starving. His hair was tidily cut and he wore a high-necked silk tunic, with the globe and crescent Pilgrim's badge on its breast. Conditions in the royal palace were obviously better than in the other cities. But it was impossible to feel envious of Asleck.

"My people," he said. "It makes me very sad that I am unable to visit you and share your troubles at this time. But, as you know, communications are difficult enough; transport is nearly impossible in the present situation. Besides which, for reasons of state, I must of necessity remain here where I can guide our war effort. But, because I cannot be with you in person, it does not mean that you are not always in my thoughts.

"And it is because I appreciate your difficulties that I have now decided to reverse the policy of defence which we instituted two years ago. Tomorrow, all the capital ships of the Terran fleet, under the command of Admiral Abran Loossi, will make a final, determined bid to smash the Throngian blockade. If they are successful they will proceed to Proxima Centauri to appeal for military and material aid from the Emperor of Sirius. If they should fail then we have made our last bid and must endure to the end.

"I ask you all to pray to the Mother of All that She guides us to success in this last endeavour."

The the band played "Earth it is of thee" and we sang. And the king's image faded from the screen.

A few of us, a pitiful few, seemed to respond to the life-line of hope thrown us by the king. We made a few futile gestures towards tidying ourselves; gestures that were immediately negated by the conditions in which we existed. We began to talk to one another again and one or two voices were heard uplifted in song. But for the vast majority it was as if they had not heard a word the king had said. During the night which followed I tried to talk about the fleet's chances to my fifteen room-mates. But in answer to my words they stared at me glassy-eyed.

Yet there were enough who were aware and involved to fill the observation gallery at day-break. We were silent now and did not look at one another, only through the glass at the sky. The sun was shining but, with the atmosphere gone, the sky was black and full of stars. We were too far round the curvature of the Earth to be able to see the fleet ascend from the Tibetan Plateau. But we had all seen space-battles before and knew what to expect. We kept on watching and waiting.

In mid-morning it came, from a point to the left of the moon as we looked at it—a thin haze spreading across the sky and dimming the stars in that quarter. This was the after-blast of the first disrupter broadside fired between the two fleets. Then, as the few particles which existed in space became charged, the thin mist became brighter in quality. Finally, more than a tenth of the sky we could see was covered by a lurid patch—white-yellow at the fringe but blood-red at the heart, and shot with all the colours of the spectrum.

All this was more than a million miles distant so that it was a silent and detail-less battle we were watching. Yet no-one could tear themselves away from the spectacle and we stared into space for the entire afternoon. As the day wore on the patch slipped westward to the horizon, following the sun as the Earth's rotation carried the battle out of our sight.

As the patch neared the horizon it was dimming noticeably and it was obvious that the heat of battle had passed. Then, not long after sunset, the entire sky sparkled like the interference on a cathode ray tube, as the burning wrecks of the Terran fleet were pushed back into Earth's gravitational pull by the victorious Throngi. There was no delusion on our part. We never for one moment tried to pretend that these were Throngi ships. We knew from their size and the way they burned that they were ours. The fragments fell in an orbital girdle around the Earth and several fell within sight of the dome—red-hot sheets of metal blazing wildly while any oxygen remained within them to feed the flames. Then it was over and our hopes were dashed—it seemed for ever.

four

WITH THE DEATH of that last, glorious hope, it seemed that more people than ever lapsed into a mood of deepest apathy. Yet I could not. It was like waking from a nightmare. Although you are unutterably weary and tired, you dare not go back to sleep in case you re-enter that nightmare. I knew now that there seemed no escape and that we would probably all die, either here or in a Throngian *abattoir*. Yet, if such were to be my fate, I wanted, quixotically, to be fully aware of it and not half-anaesthetised as were my fellows.

My defiance led me to the exhibition of some sense of *amour propre*. I forced my thirst to relinquish one cup of water a day which I devoted to getting some of the grime off my body. I found a pair of scissors and hacked off the tangle of my hair and beard. I even tried to wear a pair of dungarees but my body-heat and sweat caused the material to chafe me and brought on a rash. So I stripped again but still managed to feel more human and less animal than before.

Only one message came after the destruction of our fleet. It was made by Bodwin, Lord of Luna and Chancellor of the kingdom. The gravity of his expression and the sorrow explicit in his voice might have led one to believe that he merely mourned the failure of the fleet about which he expressed his regrets. But then he went

on to say, "Within twelve hours of receiving the news, our beloved King Asleck was dead.

"We, the council of magnates, have elected in his place Gie Loossi, Lord of Ceres. To secure the succession King Gie is to marry the Lady Lesina Flandray, sister to the late king. However, since King Gie was already married to the Lady Dinana Loossi, the marriage was celebrated according to the Capellan marital customs of King Gie's forebears. Lady Lesina will be known as Lesina Loossi, wife and queen-consort. Lady Dinana will be known as Dinana Loossi, second lady and companion of the royal bed-chamber.

"The council of magnates calls on all cities, through their mayors, to pledge their loyalty to the king and his ladies. The king is dead—Long live the king and preserve him from his enemies."

In a few idle days which remained I can remember wondering what the council was thinking of. It was well known that, whereas Abran Loossi, the admiral who had led that last futile attack, was a brave, if ignorant, man, his brother Gie was nothing but an arrant fool. And as for the two ladies who now shared his throne, their reputations had once made gossip-fodder for every space-captain who plied within the orbit of Pluto. The puzzle occupied my mind for a few days and was then banished by an event of much more importance. For the plague struck.

Bred in our filthy bodies and the stagnant sewers, the disease erupted in one night and had struck down and killed thousands within a matter of days. A handful of medical men struggled hard to overcome it but their efforts were doomed before they started. Not only was the sheer magnitude of the outbreak beyond them but they had no clear idea as to what disease it was they were fighting. It was quite a common affliction but the germs which caused it had been so mutated by the latent radiation as to make it incurable without laboratory and research facilities which we just did not possess. And the death roll doubled daily.

We could not bury the bodies since the floor of the dome was made of solid concrete. Nor could we cremate them since fuel was so short. Instead, the dead and dying

lay where they fell, often rotting for days, until such time as an able-bodied man equipped with a space-suit could spare the time to drag the body outside the dome.

One after another my room-mates died while I remained immune—perhaps because of my recent interest in personal hygiene. As they fell ill I took my turn in caring for them, a care which was helped by the fact that, as our members grew less we had more water to spare so that I could sponge them down when they grew feverish and I had the liquid I needed for all my additional labour; for very few were able or willing to help. As I say, I think my immunity was partly due to my cleansing activities of the past few weeks. But I think I was also helped by the comparative activity of my mind. People caught the disease like sheep going unprotesting to the slaughter and then lay down happily to die. Even the still-fit watched uncaring with their blank eyes, as people fell around them.

The plague raged for a fortnight until there was hardly anyone left to die. The streets emptied and the air cooled to the extent that we who were left had to resume the wearing of outer garments. There had not been a morning service for over a week and, for the first time, I began to feel the imminence of our defeat by the Throngi. After the heat and noise, a chill and silence had fallen over the city which seemed to be the chill and silence of death.

On the day that the last of my room-mates died I pushed his body in a hand-cart across the now-empty city, on my way to the main air-lock and his burial. The place where the suits were kept was deserted and the lock was unmanned. So, on my own initiative, I took down a suit and put it on and, working the mechanism myself, took my companion under the arms and dragged him outside.

Beyond the dome the only thing which had once dominated the landscape was the space-ship owned by the city. Now however, one's attention was drawn, not to the slender shape of the ship, but to the great mound of the dead which rose out of the plain like a man-made mountain—the death-roll had been so heavy. Usually, in the silent solitude of the open ground, that mound was an oppres-

sive and ever-present magnet for one's eyes. Today, in sharp contrast to the deserted city streets, my attention was distracted by the numbers of people moving about. The space about the dome was almost hectically busy and the tiny radio in my helmet crackled with the number of conversations proceeding.

I ignored them, although several figures moved towards me. I went about my sad task of disposing of poor Joe, dropping his body on the heap. I would have liked to have said the Office of Rest for him. But I knew neither his surname, titles or planet of origin—so I was unable to observe the forms (Earth have him in Her care). But I bowed my head for a moment or two.

"You have managed to survive the plague?" The voice boomed in my helmet, loud and clear with proximity. I turned. I thought that in the past few weeks I had grown to know all the active inhabitants of the city but this man was a stranger to me. I looked more closely at his suit, which bore an unfamiliar blue chequer pattern, and I saw that the globe and crescent of his badge was surmounted by the small crown which meant that he was in the royal service. My eyes left him for a second and I glanced quickly around. Then I saw that close behind the city's ship stood another, so close as to appear a trick of the light to an unguarded eye. Then, by looking even closer, I could see that there was a fair sprinkling of the blue check suits among the crowd which moved across the space between city, ships and dead. It seemed that we had visitors.

"Yes," I said finally, in answer to his question.

"Have you any space-going experience?" was his inconsequential rejoinder.

"I was astrogator-videist in the service of my Lord Telfan of Ganymede," I replied. "Before the Throngi attacks became too pressing for commercial flights, that is."

"Thank the Mother for that," he said. "The king has recalled all those ships which remain planetside and he wants each city to crew its own ship. My men are searching the dome now but, until you turned up, the only men we had found who had ever been in space were two pilear mechanics. Unless we find someone fairly soon it

looks as though you will become captain of your city's ship . . . by default."

And the only man they found was an ex-purser who had retired from the Sirian run more than twenty years previously. That's all I can say. I wish I could describe my feelings and the reactions of my fellow-citizens; how we evacuated the city and prepared the ship. But it is all a blank in my memory. To leave the dome after so long and in such a manner as to suggest that a strong organisation still existed elsewhere; the change in our circumstances was too great and too sudden to be assimilated at once. We stood around waiting for the word to be given that all were out of the city except the dead and dying. There were some two hundred of us at the finish —men relieved to be leaving the dome at last; men hating the dome but shocked by being torn from a place to which they had become rooted by the depth of their experience there; men who were dismayed to find a population of forty thousand whittled away to the complement of a smallish space-ship.

At last the word was given to my informant and he turned to me, "So you are our senior officer," he said. "We can give you a skeleton crew to help you get your ship back to Everest. But after that we shall expect you to train your own fellow-citizens to work the ship."

I nodded and gathered together my motley force, together with the half-dozen men who would actually pilot the ship. Then we shut our doors against that reproachful mountain of dead.

five

THE SHIP LIFTED easily enough, with our sister-ship following closely. And the lights of the deserted city began to wink out as its cybernetic guardians sensed the removal of living charges from their care. Then, suddenly the entire dome mushroomed up in a gout of smoke and flame. Over the loudspeaker a voice said unemotionally, "We were sorry to have to do that but it is essential that we do not leave the Throngi a foothold on the planet. You may consider it, if you like, as an hygienic way of disposing of the dead." There was silence from my com-

panions. I think they felt the shock our departure all the more for their umbilical link with the past being cut so brutally. Personally, I was too bound up in the sheer joy of flight to spare a thought for the city.

I had once studied for my master's certificate and, although I had only faced the control panel of a trainer and, although it was five years since I had last left Earth, all my acquired knowledge came flooding back within seconds of lift-off. Aided by two lieutenants from the royal ship, I was soon handling the controls with assurance and, as we felt the first stomach-turning surge of free-fall, I felt freer and cleaner than I had for many months; even though we were tied to an orbital trajectory and did not touch true space.

Below us the devastated face of Earth revealed her scars. Everywhere we looked the land shone deep blue with the burns of radiation. And if you looked up you could see that electric blue mirrored in the dots and dashes which were the ion-trails of patrolling Throngi ships mounting blockade. It was a narrow course we had to steer between the deadliness below and the menace above.

But my astrogator was a minor genius. We required no course corrections and we started our descent at the exact point where the Everest ground-crew could pick us up with their tractor-beams and lower us gently on to the ground-pad. And that was a work requiring some delicacy because the pad bristled with ships like a sea of frozen metal. The impression of numbers was an illusion I know. There were, I think, one hundred and thirty cities left on Earth, and not all of them had been able to contribute their ships. There were about as many royal ships left after the fleet had been destroyed. So there were, at most, three hundred ships on that field. But in their serried ranks they seemed to stretch to the horizon in a city of shining spires having sprung up overnight like mushrooms in a culture-bed.

Before the tubes were fully cool, men were spilling out of the lock, eager after their long incarceration to see Everest—"shrine and fleshpot of the pilgrim planet" as an historian once called the capital. Very conscious of my new-found dignity I followed more slowly; but no less

eagerly. However I found my previous informant waiting for me at the foot of the elevator shaft. He now introduced himself as Lieutenant Cori of the royal navy.

"My men will look after your crew," he said. "But I'm afraid that you are expected to attend the audience the king is giving to the city captains. So I must take you there. Then I'll show you your quarters and, after that perhaps we can see something of the city."

I followed him across the pad towards the towering buildings of the royal palace. At first I thought that there might be some trouble in the air system of my suit, or that the altitude might have affected me because the distant perspective seemed to advance and recede. Then, as the singing in my ears increased in pitch, the face-plate of my helmet started to mist up as my body-heat increased in fever. Far, far, far away I heard Cori say something and then there was nothing but the floor rising to meet me. My last conscious thought was regret that immunity should only be apparent and should only persist until such time as the promise of release had been dangled tantalisingly before me.

In the time which followed I relived my two years in the bubble city. I thought I was dead and transported to some hell modelled for me alone. But there were occasional flashes of lucidity which told me I only dreamt and that, somewhere outside myself, the world went on. Like a fish peering out of his bowl I used to stare up into a circular world which was at times fringed with the heads of watchers, sometimes inhabited by only one or two. Sometimes I could see nothing but ceiling, but there were voices there, far away and muffled so that I could not understand them.

Then there came a longer period of consciousness when I became aware of the tank in which I lay, bathed in a nutrient solution with innumerable wires taped to my body. The faces were there again, peering over the rim of the tank and this time I distinctly heard one say, "Here's one who will live. I think we could have him out of there now."

And hands reached in towards me. But, as they detached the wires from my skin I lost consciousness again.

Later I woke in a small darkened room. For the first time I was in full possession of my faculties; I knew where I was and what I had gone through. At first I thought I was alone but I heard a slight sound and, turning my head, I saw a man rise from where he had been sitting and come to my bedside. As the light fell on his face I recognised him and an instinctive prompter in my mind made me sit up in his presence.

"Please lie back," he said. "You will only harm yourself. And, since the king has stripped me of my titles and estates, I no longer have the right to demand your courtesy. I am no longer Lord Bodwin of Luna, but merely Bodwin Tomos, a space-ship captain. A post which, by the way, I have gained at your expense. While you were ill your crew elected me as captain. With you as my first officer, of course, if you should live."

Through a throat, cracked and dry through non-use, I managed to say that I would be honoured. Then we began to talk.

During the next few days Bodwin was never far from my room. His interest was due partly, I think, to his sympathy for me; partly out of interest in a man with whom he must work closely. But largely it was because he could talk freely to me and work some of the resentment out of his system. It was known that the Brothers of the Hospital would never allow the king's spy-phones to be placed in their cells. Therefore the corridors of the hospital were thronged with the demoted nobility come to talk in safety to those, like myself, who had been stricken by the plague—though, thank the Good Mother, in a place where the cure was known for all but the most extreme cases.

I learnt a lot from Bodwin in those few days. I learnt for example that the magnates had originally chosen Gie as king because they felt that a weak king would leave the administration of the kingdom in their hands. They had devised a plan whereby the ships of Earth would be collected together to act as an evacuation fleet—it was felt that after the plague had swept the cities there were too few people left to defend an Earth which was no longer really worth defending. But the shadow-king had suddenly found a will of his own. This over-foolish man

was torn between the conflicting ambitions of his two wives and was eager to make his own mark upon life. He had therefore devised a plan whereby, instead of leaving under flag of truce, the fleet would lift and plunge toward the sun. It was hoped that the Throngi would believe that they were set either on mass-suicide or on panic-stricken escape. Then, when the fleet was hidden by the glare and radiation of the sun, they would double back and take the Throngi in the rear.

Of course the magnates, led by Bodwin, had protested. But the king felt himself to be strong. The palace guard was fanatically devoted to him (or his wives—both were said to have a taste for young, handsome guardsmen and to be liberal with their favours). Also, three out of the nine seemed to favour the course of death and glory. Bodwin of Luna, Telfon of Ganymede, Sebor Saturnini, Thack Pitor of Transmundu, the Priestess Elfoten and the Lady Pantar of Venus—all these were deprived of their titles and rights and, together with their associates, forced to make what terms they could to secure places with the fleet. My crew had chosen Bodwin as their captain, despite his expressed wish to do no more than serve in the humblest capacity. And indeed, they and I were pleased to have him. We knew we had to follow the fleet but we knew that with Bodwin as captain there would be no foolhardy, albeit glorious gestures.

six

I WAS PRESENT on two occasions when there was a confrontation between King Gie and Bodwin. The first was three days after I was let out of hospital and we attended a reception given by the king for all captains and first officers in the fleet. Bodwin had not wanted to go but his former colleagues who had been demoted with him, persuaded him to attend so that we could make one last stand against the king's plans. I, for one, was glad when he decided to attend since I was eager to see this king we had been given.

The reception was held in the great hall of the royal palace where, at the height of the kingdom's glory, one

glittering occasion had followed another. The present occasion was far from glittering and most certainly not happy. An atmosphere of hate and distrust pervaded the hall so that as we entered it we felt our nerves tense in response. The people were separated into two quite distinct camps. On the one hand were the Terran born. Once the most loyal of the king's subjects the death of Asleck had marked a watershed in our loyalties. Years of conflict and compromise with the Throngi had turned us into realists. When the last of the line of kings which had been installed by the Pilgrims had passed away it was as we woke to that reality and realised what a barren future we faced. Asleck was the personification of an ideal but Gie meant nothing to us and we merely wanted to leave, without fuss.

But opposite us were ranged the newcomers; young men for the most part who had come to Earth in the last few years still burning with zeal and ambition. They had never seen a green and fruitful Earth, only its shattered ghost. But they were the fanatic sons of fanatics who had been told that the greatest allegiance known to Man was his loyalty to Earth. And if they were shown a burnt-out clinker and told that that was Earth they were perfectly capable of transferring their loyalties to it quite blindly.

The Terran-born magnates had installed Gie Loossi as king intending him to be a mouthpiece without any power. But to the newcomers Gie, as a Capellan, was one of themselves and they gave their loyalty to him so enthusiastically that they gave him that power that the old aristocracy would have denied him. No wonder then that relations were strained—I do believe that there was less difference in attitude between we Terrans and the Throngi than there was between us and the newcomers.

The king's wives were not there—thank the Mother. They hated each other, despised their husband and ignored everyone else. Any group of which they and he formed part bore within it the seeds of violence. So it was a relief to see them absent. But the king's *eminence grise* was there. Renal of Chatlan was another newcomer who had managed to worm his way into exalted circles by way of his gaiety, charm and bravery in battle. But if he was gay, he was flippant; if he was charming,

he was insincere; and if he was brave, he was sadistically cruel. He also hated the Throngi with an unreasoned lust which had often led him into treachery in his dealings with them. He it was, without a doubt, who had put the plan of attack into Gie's mind. The king's wives could never have thought of it since the Lady Dinana asked for nothing more than to hold court on Everest while there was food to eat and air to breathe; while the Lady Lesina, as a member of the Flandray dynasty, agreed with the Terran-born—though she would never demean herself to say so.

As soon as Bodwin entered the hall the conflict resolved itself. The newcomers ranged themselves behind the king—or rather they ranged themselves behind the puppet of Renal the puppetmaster. And, because of Bodwin's lineage and his prestige as ex-Chancellor, he had become the natural champion of the Terran-born. The crowd was now divided physically as well as figuratively, with a clear alleyway showing between both sides in which stood Gie, Renal, Bodwin and I, slightly in advance of our respective supporters. The original plan had been for King Gie to address the assembly but now he spoke instead, directly to Bodwin.

"My lo . . . *Captain* Bodwin. This difference between us hurts us all. Won't you be reconciled to me. Rejoin the Council and help us to lead the fleet against the enemy."

"Your majesty," boomed Bodwin, ensuring that his voice could be heard throughout the hall, "I ask for nothing more than to return to my natural allegiance and take my place on the Council. Then I could help you in the negotiations with the Throngi which will obtain our honourable withdrawal from this planet."

"Retreat?" shouted an incredulous voice from the opposing crowd, while another yelled, "You would negotiate with the Throngi?"

"Yes," was the simple answer and there was an instant babble among the newcomers, several voices being heard to say, "Compromise."

"Every man must compromise to live," Bodwin said and the angry voices grew angrier. For a moment my

blood ran cold. Little more than three years previously, on King Gie's home planet, a returning pilgrim had been torn to pieces by the crowd, merely for suggesting that the Throngi were not totally evil.

"Do you mean," said Gie, "that you would desert the Earth and betray the Mother?"

"And can you not see that Earth is dead?" retorted Bodwin. "No-one believes now that the Mother is identical with the Earth. She is a part of each of us—Her children. Let's go back to the Far Stars and work for the Glory of Man—not for a barren lump of rock."

"Traitor" . . . "Blasphemer" . . . "Throngi-lover!" It was an animal cry with an underlying note of malicious aggression. I really think they might have attacked us if Bodwin had not turned on his heel and led us from the hall. As he reached the door the king called after him, "You will return to your ships and you will accompany the fleet. Or stand foresworn as traitors."

Telfan, former Lord of Ganymede and once my overlord, came up to Bodwin as we left the ante-chamber and whispered urgently, "Why not make a break for the ships. We could perhaps come to an agreement with the Throngi and get to Centauri; the Sirian Emperor is bound to give us refuge."

"No," said Bodwin, and his voice was full of regret, "I hate this futile gesture as much as you and if we were still on the Council I could not be associated with it. But since I am ordered to go by the king I helped to elect myself, I cannot in honour shirk my duty without being foresworn as he says. I cannot dictate to your conscience but I think we must go. Then, if we come through this alive, then will be the time to go to Centauri."

Walking in his wake, I told myself that I too had once had a sense of honour and duty but it could not survive long if I were continually offered hope, only to have it snatched from me. Especially now, when we seemed doomed to die on an enterprise everyone whose opinion I respected agreed was fatal. Yet, at the same time, I had to admit that if I were offered the chance of escape I doubted that I would take it. Reason was strong but sentiment was more powerful.

seven

THE LAST FLEET ever assembled by the Kingdom of Terra lifted from the Tibetan Plateau on the Eve of Ecclestation Day, in the hundred and seventh year of the Foundation. Every human left on Earth was involved and every ship. This was the final commitment.

It was a brave affair, with flags flying and banners waving, the cheers of the crowd and the bands playing —though, with no atmosphere, all had to be electronically simulated. The crews gathered by their ships in parade order while the king walked proudly by, followed by his wives and his closest associates. Renal of Chatlan prominent among them. They swaggered past in their own auras of optimism while we who looked on remained convinced of the imminence of our own deaths.

The fleet lifted gracefully enough, leaving the summit of the mountain deserted except for the golden figure of the Mother atop Her shrine. No explosion shook that out of existence. Whether we succeeded or failed the Shrine of Earth was too holy for us to bear the taint of sacrilege into battle after having destroyed it. We took our last look at Her upraised arm which flashed in the sun. Then we shut our eyes to the sights of Earth and turned our gaze outwards.

The computors hummed and chattered vigorously because our course was a matter of the utmost precision. We were set to an elliptical orbit sharply within that of Earth, which would graze the outer fringes of the sun and then take us deep into space and back in the rear of the blockading Throngi. In the calculation of that orbit we could afford no mistakes because the passage of the sun was critically measured. Too far out and we would lose the element of surprise we needed, too near and we would be unable to escape the solar gravitational pull. Our lives and the success of the entire enterprise depended on the hair's breadth calculations of each ship's computors.

At first all went well. The Throngi expected that we would do either one of two things. We were either coming out to fight in which case half the Throngi fleet waited for us in a Translunar orbit. Or we were making a run

for Proxima Centauri in which case we would switch to interstellar drive as soon as we hit free fall. The other half of the Throngi fleet was already beyond Pluto, matching our potential FTL velocity in readiness to intercept. When we did neither of these things they were nonplussed. The few patrol-ships which still blocked our path were blasted out of our way without difficulty and we were away from Earth, leaving a divided and confused enemy behind us.

The hours which followed were as boring as spaceflight can be. At five-minute intervals the pilot ship of the fleet would drone out the time, the orbital distance, any course corrections and always the same ending—"No pursuit." Except for the astrogator-techs there was nothing for us to do; we just sat and waited.

We crossed the Venusian orbit, then the Mercurian. Then it began to get hot.

After our years in the domes I think we had all acquired a certain immunity to excessive heat and at first we did not notice how the thermometer had soared. It was Bodwin, who had spent the last few years in the comparative coolness of Everest, who first noticed the heat and commented on it. Then, even the most hardened began to notice. It first became apparent in the discomfort involved in touching a metal surface. But as we came more and more under the sun's influence it began to affect the air so that it seemed to move sluggishly and lie on one's body like a blanket. Our lungs turned into fiery bellows gasping for breath and that breathlessness affected our movements and lowered a red veil before our eyes.

Bodwin's voice swam rather than cut through the fug. "I think we would feel more comfortable if we stripped." So we relieved ourselves of our clinging uniforms, retaining only our boots—since the first man to step on the metal floor with his bare feet had screamed with the pain. It was as if the wheel had come full circle from our time in the domes when we stood naked, the sweat running down our bodies in a glistening torrent and, falling to the floor, evaporating on contact with the hot floor so that each of us moved in a self-made, calf-high fog of steam.

The voice of our unemotional pilot came over the intercom, "It is recommended that you move radiation screens

to solside of your vessels. We are about to commence the transit."

(About to commence? Surely it was nearly over?)

Having stripped and, having moved the screens between us and the sun, we gained some temporary relief. But it was merely temporary and with every moment we lost the respite we had won.

It was as we began to feel weak again under the glare; when we were totally committed to the solar orbit, that the alarm bells shattered the thick silence and a voice over the intercom began to shout "Red—Echo—Three—eight—four." Then another voice cut in with "Red—Echo—Three—eight—eight." Then there was another voice with another sighting and then another, and another until the air, what with the bells and the voices, throbbed with a palpable sound which ultimately mingled with the crude crackle of a space-disrupter. The Throngi had found us.

The voice of the king as commander-in-chief cut across the voices of the look-outs. "You will prepare for action," he said, "Combat suits will be worn and stations will be manned at all times."

The heat was hardly bearable when our bodies could breathe. Now we had to smother them in the harsh folds of our suits and isolate ourselves in our oven-like prisons. Then we must creep into the foetid bolt-holes of the disrupter-ports to peer in vain through sweat-blurred sights. Under the sun's glare the viewscreens were inoperative and the echo-scanners little better. Yet we had to seek out the minute blips which were Throngi ships with our faulty equipment. Since the Throngi are not affected by vacuum, heat or radiation and since they are quite careless of individual life, their combat-ships are little else but a motor and a basic framework within which the pilot can sit, quite exposed except for the oxygen masks over his gills. As a result their inertia is almost non-existent and they are infinitely manoeuvrable. We were forced by our orbital path to wallow on along our pre-ordained course while the enemy could weave in and out of the fleet like birds through trees. One sweated away to get a Throngian in your sights and, before the trigger could be pulled, the ship was gone; and might be a hundred miles away. One or two Throngi vessels disappeared in gouts of energy but the

white mist shot through with a purple-black told me that our losses were more like four to their one—and theirs were one-man ships while ours were crewed by two hundred each.

After an hour of battle I was spelled by one of the crew and I made my way back to the main cabin where Bodwin stood at the control panel, involved in a vigorous debate with someone over the intra-ship system. I only caught the tail-end of the conversation which Bodwin ended with the words, "It is the only thing we can do then—if that's your opinion." He broke contact and turned to face me, looking as weary as I felt. "The drive-techs report that the engine is in a near-critical state," he said, "It only needs one more disrupter beam to score a direct hit on us and the whole ship goes up. I'm going to have to move some of the radiation screens to face the enemy." I nodded my agreement without fully understanding what it was he was suggesting. In fact I only began to grasp it when I heard the great protective fans begin to rotate about the ship, leaving whole stretches of our side exposed to the full glare of the sun.

How long, O Mother, did it last? I do not know. I was certainly not fully conscious for the rest of that time, though it seems I carried out my duties well enough. But every movement had to be carefully considered and, in execution one's body shrieked in protest. We were slowly beginning to die and must surely have done so if our ships had not emerged from their flirtation with the sun.

The temperature went down so much more slowly than it had risen that it was a very long time before we realised that it was cooler. It was only when the Throngi attacks lessened and we had time to think that the fact sank in. The heat lessened, the attacks ceased and we half-extricated ourselves from our suits and sat down to let our jangled nerves unwind. And, as our viewscreens cleared, a voice yelled over the intercom, "Halt."

We gave the order and brought the ship to a halt and our eyes went to the screens. Behind and to one side was a blazing segment of the sun filling our horizon. Around us was the Terran fleet, once diamond-shaped in formation but tattered now as if the diamond had been inexpertly cut. At the periphery of our vision were the light

interceptors of the Throngi, hovering like jackals round a herd of dying cattle. But ahead of us was a glowing silver crescent—the assembled Throngi fleet in full strength. Our hopes of a surprise attack were long since gone. Now, if he wanted to escape we would have to fight for it.

That voice, that lisp so symptomatic of everything that was weak and poor in King Gie, spoke softly to us, "*The Aurelia, The Day-Break, Artemis,*" he went on to list twelve ships, "These ships will lead an attack on the exact centre of the enemy line in the hope that we can divide the two wings of his fleet. The rest of the fleet will follow in close support."

Aboard the *Day-Break* we looked hard at one another. It was obvious that we were being detailed to form a suicide squad in the hope that before we were destroyed we would succeed in blasting a hole through the alien fleet. It was equally obvious that the twelve ships mentioned were those which contained those members of the nobility demoted for arguing with the king. Even at this time Gie Loossi had time to vent some personal spite on his enemies.

As Bodwin understood the full significance of the message, he seemed to straighten himself and I remembered his stated reason for accepting his demotion so tamely. He believed the mission was doomed to failure which is why he argued against it. His family pride would not permit him to be associated with a futile gesture. But that pride equally dictated that he should serve his elected king so long as the responsibility for giving the orders lay elsewhere. He half-smiled now as destiny called him. He bent to the communicator and made swift arrangements with the eleven other captains. Then he gave a collective order to the drive-techs, "Run engines and damp them."

The muffled drone of the engines grew to a bellow, to a protesting shriek as the dampers prevented the released energy from escaping through the tubes; storing up our potential acceleration like a miser's hoard. Then, "Engineers. Gun them." The lever slammed home; the dampers blew out and we leapt from rest at a speed which created a force in excess of 10g. I slammed back in my seat and blacked out for a second.

When I came to, the ship was tearing towards the line of Throngi ships and collision seemed imminent. Yet, just as that line of waiting ships loomed enormous in our viewscreens, it suddenly went away. With a speed as great as ours the Throngi commander moved his ships out of our path so that when our disrupters opened up they poured their energies into the blackness of outer space. We flashed through the gap before we had realised what had happened and, such was our momentum, that we were two thousand miles out before we brought our ships to a halt. And by that time, the gap was closed again.

Twelve ships out of three hundred, we stopped in that vast emptiness and watched the Throngi fleet close in on the king's ships as a net closes on a shoal of fish. Bodwin sat in mute astonishment and it was I who leant forward and gave the command to proceed to Centauri. There was nothing we could do. The king's position was beyond redemption now. We must now go to the Empire to tell the galaxy of the loss of Mother Earth, to raise the ransom for those who would be captured and to live out our lives in penitential shame for our part in that loss.

eight

THE SECOND TIME that I saw Bodwin and King Gie come face-to-face was about a year after we had arrived in the Empire following the fall of Earth.

We were not well received. The Sirian Empire was the successor state to the first Terran Interstellar Confederacy. To the Sirians therefore, the Far Stars which had broken with the Confederacy during the Interregnum, were inhabited by barbarians. The Empire had tolerated the Kingdom of Terra since it had been founded at their invitation to form a buffer-state between the heart worlds of the Empire and the Rimward planets of the Throngi. Also, since a century of proximity had given Terran society overtones of Sirian civilisation, we were perhaps a little more tolerable to them than the newcomers and pilgrims. But we refugees were an embarrassment to them as well as causing some resentment since our story brought the pilgrims flooding in from the Far Stars, all hoping to use the Empire as a springboard to launch a

new pilgrimage which would rescue Earth from the Throngi.

But, if the Sirians resented us, we were hated by the pilgrims. They came to the planets of Proxima Centauri horrified at the decadence they had found on the heart worlds of the Empire; utterly shocked that under the protection of the Imperial Trade Commission, Throngi could freely walk the streets of the capital. Then they found us and focused all their resentment on us. For ten years they had neglected us while we had held the Throngi at bay with dwindling resources. Only when Earth was lost did they discover how precious its possession was to them. And the greater their neglect of Earth, the more they hated us for losing it.

So we hid ourselves away and tried to live as obscurely as we were able. So it was several months after the event before we heard that Gie had come to Centauri. For, despite the parsimony of the Empire, the ransom had been collected and paid and the leading prisoners freed. NNkh Hmmhh, the Throngian admiral had treated them with the greatest courtesy; all except for Renal of Chatlan whom he had personally torn apart and eaten for his war crimes against the Throngi. King Gie he had looked after in his own household and had permitted him to leave, even before the ransom arrived, conditional upon Gie's oath never to bear arms against the Throngi again.

When we had the news of the non-aggression agreement we almost expected King Gie to join us in our small colony of pariahs. For surely the pilgrims would shun him for making such an agreement. Yet, though he came to us, it was in a most unexpected fashion.

The door-caller warbled one evening as we were preparing to go to bed. I shared rooms at that time with Bodwin, Telfan and three former fellow-citizens. It was one of the latter who went to the door and came back with a figure muffled in the enveloping cloak of a Centauran Watchman. And that was King Gie. We all six bowed our heads in respect since, despite our opinion of him, he was still, by title, king of Terra. We stood foolishly silent for a few minutes, conscious of the constraint of our last meeting. Then the king said, "My Lord Bodwin I shall come straight to the point. I want you

KATHERINE MACLEAN

THE OTHER

TREE SHADOWS MOVED on the grey linoleum of the hospital floor, swaying like real leaves and twigs. Joey blurred his eyes to make the leaf shadows green.

The floor quivered slightly to foam-padded footsteps, and a man-shaped shadow appeared across the sunlight. That was Dr. Armstrong. He was kind. He always walked softly and then stood and shuffled when he hoped you would notice him.

The feet shuffled hopefully. When Joey concentrated on the doctor's shadow he could turn the head part pink, like a face.

Dr. Armstrong's voice said something. It was a pleasant light tenor voice, a little anxious.

"What did he say?" Joey asked the Other, the one in his head who listened and calculated and explained.

"He asked *How are you*?"

"What did he mean?"

"He wants you to get up and be busy, like him," said the cool advice of his Other, his guardian and advisor. "That's what they all want."

"Not right now. I am watching the leaves. What shall we tell him?"

"Tell him, *Just about the same.*"

Joey made the effort, and spoke, hearing his own voice very close to his ears. He was ready to turn and look out the window now, but the doctor's feet were beside him, anxiously demanding his attention, afraid he would turn away.

"What did he say?" Joey asked the Other.

There was a pause, a barrier, a reluctance to speak, then the cool voice answered. "He asked about me."

"Was he—" Joey was alarmed. People meddled, people said things which got inside and hurt. And yet Dr. Armstrong had always been nice, he never criticized, so far. "No—I don't want to know. Well—tell me a little."

The voice was indistinct. "Asked who you talk to—when you . . . before talking outside to him."

"Tell him it's you," Joey said, confident and warm. The voice was his friend, and Dr. Armstrong was his friend. They should know each other. The voice helped Dr. Armstrong. "Tell him it's you."

"What name? Authority people need names for existing things. They don't understand without names."

"What are you?"

"I am a construct. You made me."

"We can't tell him that. People punish me for making up people." Joey felt pain in his middle, near stomach and heart. It was hard to breath. "Mommee shouted and cried."

"We won't tell him that," the voice agreed.

Joey felt calmer. The voice was good, there had to be a good name for it, one that the outside others would approve. "We can find a name for you. There are so many words. What else are you?"

"I am part your mother and your father and little parts and feelings of anyone who ever worried about you and wanted you to stop doing things so that you would be all right and strangers would not be angry at you. And you made me into a grownup to talk to you. Many years. I've grown wise, Joey. I worry about you and want you to stop . . ."

"Don't bother me about that now," Joey said, withdrawing himself in his head so that the voice was far away where he would not have to listen. "You explain to Dr. Armstrong that you are on his side, that you are grownup like him, and tell me what to do. I wouldn't know when to get up, or what people want. . . . They would be angry."

"Doctors don't want to talk to me. They want to talk to you, Joey. They don't ask how to do something: they ask what do you feel."

"I can't talk. They'd see me. I'd cry, and want to touch arms and rub cheeks. Talk for me. Tell them you're a doctor. Use their words."

Joey heard his voice close but too quiet and mumbly. He forced it louder. ". . . *father image, Dr. Armstrong.*

He tells me what is right to say. He is strict, so it is all right."

That sounded good. That sounded safe to say. Joey heard the musical tenor of Dr. Armstrong's anxious, well-intentioned voice. It would be praise.

Don't listen to it, Joey. It's not—

Pain and grief struck him in the middle, curling him over. Got to get away quickly or die. Make it not happen. Into the past, in the dark, in the comforting dark, before people could take away their love. He was lying on the floor, curled up, and the warm dark was wrapping around like a blanket.

But the feet still stood by, shuffling nervously. That past event must be finished before it could be forgotten. Joey took a deep breath, made a shouting effort, heard his distant scream and left it behind, screaming forever like a soundless sign on the wall of a deserted train station, at a distant place in time.

"He said the wrong thing. Tell him to go away."

Outside-people do not know the roads and paths inside the world of image, memory, and dream: they stumble, blunder and destroy among the fragile things. He decided that he should not have listened and replied. When time came around to return from darkness to the world of light, he would be silent.

Doctor Armstrong, twenty-four years old, successful and considered brilliant, walked into his small office in the hospital. He carefully shut the door behind him and made sure his latch had caught before sitting at his desk.

He put his face down into his hands. *(He said the wrong thing. Tell him to go away.)* The article about Rosen's techniques had said that Rosen talked freely with his patients, discussing their fantasy worlds with them as if they were real, and explaining the meaning of the symbols to them. Perhaps he should see it demonstrated before trying it again.

God! Joey had fallen from the chair and hit the floor already curled up, knees to chin, eyes shut, as if stunned and dead. Maybe he would be all right. Tomorrow, casual inquiry to the nurses . . . The nurses might blame him

for Joey. How many other mistakes did they blame him for already?

Why was he sitting like this with his face in his hands?

I'm tired, he thought. *Just tired.*

Doctor Armstrong leaned his face more heavily into his hands, his elbows braced on the desk as though he were tired. Tears trickled down between his spread fingers and splashed on the psychiatric journal on his desk.

It is not I who is weeping, he thought. *I am the cool and logical student, the observer of human actions. I can observe myself also, which proves that my body weeps. This wastes time I could use to study and to think.*

Tears trickled down between his spread fingers and splashed on the psychiatric journal.

It is not I who is weeping, he thought. It is that other, the childish feeling in me, who can be wounded by love and hope, and pity and confusion, and being alone. I am an adult, a scientist. It is the other who weeps, the ungrownup one we must conceal from the world.

"No one sees you," he said to the Other. *"You can weep for five minutes. This spasm will pass."*

JON DECLES

SANITARIUM

FAT, UGLY Mrs. Carson, she of the dripping dewlaps and electro-bleached hair, wiped, with a scarred hand, the melon juice from her mulitudinous chins. She fell back on the cushioned chaise-longue, puffing and fighting for her breath. She emitted a little groan of pain and delight, and closed her wrinkled eyelids, allowing the flashes of fire that crossed her eyes to temper themselves, allowing her heart to stop its incessant throbbing. Her mouth fell half open and a slight trace of spittle wound its way from the side of her lips to the blue silk bed jacket she was wearing. She was, of course, *the* Mrs. Christopher Carson, wife of the millionaire broker. The late millionaire broker. Mr. Carson's death, by personal explosion, had made all the headlines a few years earlier.

Mrs. Carson was, at this very moment, making all the headlines herself. The police were very diligently seeking her whereabouts. Mrs. Carson made headlines *every* time she disappeared.

A nurse came over and removed the gutted rind from Mrs. Carson's lap, threw it into the disposer, and tossed the rubber gloves with which she had handled it after it. A brief fire flashed, down in the dark disposer tunnel, and the nurse continued on her work, seeing to her patients in the wards.

Not that Mrs. Carson was in a *ward*. She was far too rich for that, and far too seriously ill.

Mrs. Carson had leprosy. She would die within a few months unless corrective steps were taken. Mrs. Carson was determined that she should *not* receive that kind of medical care, and in her determination, she was violating a prime ruling of the all-powerful State. She had violated prime rulings of the State before, and she had never regretted it. Now, in the last days left to her, she was not about to allow *anything* to interfere with her way of life.

Mrs. Carson looked around her little enclosure and

was glad that she was fabulously wealthy. Glad that the air had rushed out of her husband's spaceship and left him to *pop!* with a sweet bloody crystalline iciness. Glad that he had left her *rich!*

There, she reflected, in the corner, was a piece of V'ang pottery, priceless, its blue glaze subtly shifting through the shades of the spectrum, like an oyster's shell. On the inside of the window, climbing the little strips of wood between the panes, was a rare, parasitic orchid, blooming its soft green and brown blossoms as it ate away the wood. Mrs. Carson hoped that she would live to see the window collapse.

In the centre of the room was a swimming pool. It was filled with scented water, and steamed gently in the breeze blowing through an open window. The rose smells lifted all around Mrs. Carson, and blotted out the odour of her disease and corruption. All the delightful luxuries that her husband had never allowed her, all the things that the State said were wrong for her to want, all were *hers*! She owned every one of them. And the doctors and the nurses and the guards. All of them bought with her dead husband's money.

Mrs. Carson fell asleep, and began to snore. From time to time she twitched.

Romf Brigham was washing the plastic flowers and vacuuming his lawn. His neighbours frowned on the old-fashioned arrangement, so out of place beside the clean concrete of the rest of the block, but Romf had *money*, so they tolerated him—so long as he kept it scrupulously clean. A man nearly three hundred years old is bound to have some peculiarities left over from a less enlightened age. And a man who actually has *money* may prove useful.

A young woman came out of the house next door. She wore a soft pink and gold costume, with veils so thin that one could almost see her face; the outline of her nose was clearly visible. Her eyes were daringly uncovered. Some of the people on the block were undoubtedly suffering already from severe shock.

"Hello, Jelifa," said Romf, trying to sound unperturbed.

Jelifa Thorenson didn't answer. She looked up at the dome covering the city, Romf went back to washing his flowers.

"Nice day, isn't it?" asked Jelifa.

Romf looked up at the dome.

"The sun is shining, isn't it?" he said. "How is it, Jelifa, that you always notice the weather?"

"There isn't much else to notice," said Jelifa.

"I haven't seen Harold lately," said Romf after an embarrassed moment. "Has he gone back to work?"

"No," said Jelifa. "We made enough money long ago to buy *anything*. Anything that's legal."

It was obvious that Jelifa wanted something. She went to one of the large stones of which her garden was made and sat down. She thoughtfully stirred the pure white gravel with one silk covered toe.

"Romf," she said, "I've been going to Church."

"What on earth for?" he asked.

"No special reason," she said. Then: "Mostly to alleviate the boredom."

"There are healthier ways than that," said Romf.

"Such as?" she was too eager.

"Look, at worst," said Romf, "you could take drugs. The doctors will prescribe them, if you go into a State clinic where they can watch over you. I mean, they can't have you out where you could endanger yourself or others."

Jelifa shuddered. "No, Romf, not that way. I was an attendant in one of those places once."

"Was there something amiss about the treatment?" asked Romf. "Any violation should be reported. . . ."

"Nothing amiss," she interrupted. "Just the patients themselves, lying there dreaming. They'll never wake up, and they never will want to. They'll live forever in those dope dreams. It's . . . it's as horrible as death!"

"Really Jelifa!" said Romf. "You shouldn't use language like that in public."

"Pardon me, Romf," she said. "But I feel very strongly about it. I just can't stand the idea of becoming one of those vegetables."

"If it's something you feel strongly about, then of course . . ." said Romf.

"That's why I started going to the Church," she said. "Anything was better than the drugs. But the Church is such a terrifying place! They talk about all kinds of things. Things like . . ."

"They haven't been encouraging you to . . . to make physical love, have they?" asked Romf.

"No!" said Jelifa, startled. "Harold and I are not that kind of couple. If they even suggested. . . . We aren't so bored that we are about to sink to that level. We both have first-class machines of our own. We don't even have to go to the State for satisfaction. I told you, Romf, we have lots of money, and we don't *need* that kind of thing."

"I just wondered," said Romf. "There are still some factions in the world that believe in that kind of thing."

"But Romf, you could get *germs* that way!" she said. "And what point would there be?"

"Some women still bear their own babies," he said.

"Maybe in Africa or Russia," she said contemptuously, "but certainly not in America. We are a civilized people, Romf. And what would you *do* with a baby? I mean, the nurseries and everything! You'd have to be crazy to want to raise a baby. And I'm sure the State wouldn't let a baby like that into the schools. He'd probably be just filthy."

"Please, Jelifa, you don't have to go on. I apologise for thinking such a thing. But you know the reputation the Churches have today."

"Yes, of course, Romf. I didn't mean to. . . . But you did suggest. . . . At any rate, I'm not going there any more. And I guess I'll tell Harold not to go either."

"You mean he's been going there?" asked Romf.

"Yes, that's where he is now. Tonight they have some big doings. I just don't want to go any more, so I told Harold I'd stay home. But it's so *dull*, Romf. Don't you know of anything I could do? Isn't there a party or something?"

So that was it! thought Romf. She had been playing with him. She knew about the party, and was trying for an invitation. Well, she was an attractive woman, and it would be easier to keep apart if he brought a companion.

"There is a kind of party," said Romf, "and I have

been invited. But I hardly think you'd like it, and I hadn't planned on going myself. It's just not a pleasant kind of party."

"What do you mean?" asked Jelifa.

"Well, as you may know, Mrs. Christopher Carson has set a new record, in that she has been missing fully six months with no trace. Some of her, ah, friends, are throwing a party to celebrate that somewhat perverse triumph. If we go, it would be necessary to appear, ah . . . sick."

"I could pretend to have a slight cold," said Jelifa without hesitation. "I could use a head veil as a handkerchief."

Romf looked into her eyes and saw that she was well ahead of him in her plans.

Imagine the party. People moved about gaily, saying witty things to people almost as witty as themselves. Making clever gestures. All the people at the party, save for the servants, were high on both the Social and Police Registers, with special notations after their names. They were the very *crème* of society. High and Fashionable Society. Any one of them could, with the least provocation, turn a simple word or phrase into provocation for the recitation of his or her entire case history.

Imagine the room, the grand ball room. The walls were covered in murals, lifelike murals of people of deathly pallor, marching, weapons in hand, against defenceless armies of doctors. The popular *motif massacre,* newly done by an outlawed artist. Plants, great groves of them, stood about the room. Some had not been watered in weeks and were yellow with thirst; others had been over-watered every day, and were dark and stinking with water-rot.

Guarding the main entrance to the room were two huge figures of Death, their scythes crossed like swords over the arch. Above them was a gigantic hourglass, the grains of sand running madly downward, only to be foiled by a mechanism which up-ended the glass at the last moment.

Through the door, billowing in noxious clouds like wind-caught drapes, a thick, green-black smoke came in oily announcement. Through the smoke came Miss Cynthia Billings-Walpole, and *she* was *horrible.* She was

naked, a thing which would have been considered gauche under other circumstances. Miss Cynthia's circumstances, however, were well planned. A team of illicit endocrinologists had worked for several months to set up the peculiar glandular balance which now manifested itself. She was covered with hair, long, coarse, black hair, from head to foot, and with warts, from which the hair grew voluminously. She was supported by two white-uniformed attendants, both with a fashionable case of influenza.

Miss Cynthia Billings-Walpole paused at the top of the stairs and looked out through her wart-encrusted eyelids. The ghastly party was at its height. People moved about, in wheelchairs, on crutches, in mechanically ambulated baskets, saying and doing witty things, such as expectoration. They were the *crème* of Society, Miss Cynthia Billings-Walpole was the immediate Queen, and they were all very, very sick. She wondered how she would ever top *this* entrance. Dying on the steps was old hat.

"I was sure Mrs. Carson would find that party irresistible!" said Romf to the Chief of the city's Police. "But she didn't show, and no one there had any idea where she might be."

"You did the best you could," said the Chief.

Romf rubbed his hand across his face.

"At any rate, I'm glad the sordid business is over," he said. "I don't think I'll be available for this kind of work for a long time to come. These parties are exhausting. Chief, you have no idea what these people *do* to themselves!"

"Don't forget," said the Chief, "that I see a lot of them when they're finally picked up."

"But these rich ones," said Romf, "do you really get many of them?"

"No," said the Chief. "No, we don't get nearly enough of them. The Billings-Walpole woman will be brought in, of course. You can't pretend that you caught something like that from exposure to the rain. But most of the others will get off free. If you have enough money. . . . It's only the ones who spend State funds on sickness who get hit hard. And the real fanatics, like the ones at the party, buy their way out and continue to set a bad example. And

damn it, even if we *do* catch them, they don't care! They act like martyrs."

"Well," said Romf, "let them be martyrs. Eventually they'll all be caught and conditioned or put in drug houses, and then they won't do any damage."

"Hmm. I wonder," said the Chief. "Incidentally, the woman who went with you; how did it affect her?"

"She was about to cry when we got to her place last night. I think it will cure her of hanging around cults and the nuts who frequent them. She'll convince her husband to stay away from the Church after seeing the people at the party. I don't think she'll be bored so easily from now on."

A red light flashed on the Chief's desk. He picked up a light tube and stabbed it at the wall screen. A face appeared, drawn and haggard and excited.

"Chief," said the man on the screen. "There has been a death."

"Details," said the Chief tersely.

"Man, named Harold Thorenson. We found his wife walking outside the city in the rain, crying. Asked her what was wrong and she said her husband was dead. We checked the house and there he was."

"Accident?" asked the Chief, but he knew the answer.

"No," said the man. "Disease. We have the woman down here for questioning."

"I'll be down in a minute." He switched off the screen. "If you'll excuse me, Romf?" But Romf was staring at him with eyes wide with horror. "What's the matter?"

"Jelifa Thorenson," said Romf. "She's the woman I took to the party last night."

"Maybe you'd better come along," said the Chief. "You may be able to get something out of her."

Jelifa was sitting on a stool with her veils ripped away and her face was dirty. There was strange wildness in her eyes.

"You fell for it, Romf," she said. "You fell for it just the way we planned."

"What are you talking about, Jelifa?" said Romf.

"Perhaps," said the Chief, "I should explain that Mr.

Brigham is here because he knows you and because he was in my office at the time the call came in. Because you know him you may find things a little easier on you: provided you co-operate with us."

"You didn't mention what he was doing in your office," said Jelifa. "I can tell you that much. He's one of your agents. And I'm not going to give him any information that I wouldn't give you."

"Who told you that he worked for me?" asked the Chief.

"Just a moment, Chief," said Romf. "Jelifa, what did you mean when you said that I 'fell for it'?"

"I mean that it was all planned. We knew you were going to that party, so Harold had me go with you to make sure you didn't come home too soon. You might have heard him screaming. No one else lives close enough."

"Look at this report, Romf," said the Chief.

Romf glanced at the paragraph the Chief underlined with his finger.

"Poison, eh?" he said.

"Yes," said Jelifa. "At the end. When he heard me coming in. He couldn't hold out much longer against the pain, and he was afraid I'd weaken and call you. Or worse, the Doctor."

"*But why?*" the Chief slammed his fist down on the bare desk.

"You'll never understand it!" she said, her voice cold and filled with acid. "You haven't any soul to understand."

"The Church," said Romf.

"In part," said Jelifa. "But not the way you think. It was just Harold and me who planned this. The Church only showed us the way."

"What do you mean?" asked Romf.

"They told us a lot of things about martyrs and Saints dying for things they believed in. They told us about the horrible ways those people died, and the reward that waited them after death."

"And you *believed* that?" asked Romf incredulously.

"Of course not!" Jelifa snapped. "We weren't fools, Romf. We know the score on death. It wasn't the reward

that tempted us, it was the action. Romf, those people in the book, that Bible; they were alive. And we aren't."

"This is wasting time, Romf," said the Chief. "Mrs. Thorenson, if you don't give us the information we want now, we will have to use drugs."

Jelifa shuddered. Romf recalled her reaction to the idea of drug therapy, and tried once more to get the information from her.

"Jelifa, please. If they use drugs, you'll wind up in a State house. This is important. Please co-operate."

She looked at him for several moments.

"What time is it?" she asked.

"Sixteen hundred," the Chief answered.

"All right." she said. "I'll tell you all I know. It's not much."

The fire slowly dimmed in her eyes and she relaxed, sagging into a frail bundle on the wooden stool. Romf felt sorry for her, but his sympathy was tempered by the knowledge of what she had been party to.

"We got the idea while we were going to Church. It's simple, and obvious, really." she said. "You see, it's the struggle that brings you to life. And more important, that brings you together.

"Harold and I were married and we thought life would mean something. But it didn't. We had things in common, but we didn't have anything to fight. So we couldn't be in love. Not the way the songs tell you ought to be in love, not in the deep, old way. We knew that we could be together anytime we wanted. The State would give us food and shelter, so we didn't have to work. And the Doctors have given us eternal life, precluding accident, so not even death would separate us. We didn't have any *reason* to be together.

"But if one of us was going to die, not at any special time, but just going to die for sure, then we'd *have* to live. Because if we didn't, we never could.

"Of course you wouldn't let us die. The Doctors with their oaths and their determination, wouldn't let us decide for ourselves. They had to keep that power for themselves, to remain the masters of death. So Harold went to a sick-easy and got germs. The kind you pay a lot for. And we had six months in which we loved each other.

Love, Romf, something you can't ever understand, because you have everything else.

"And now Harold is dead, and without love, I have hate, for you and all your kind. The kind who spoil things for us by being so wise and making all our decisions and. . ."

There were tears in her eyes, and she was breathing hard. Suddenly her eyes closed and she slipped from the stool. Romf tried to catch her, but the Chief held him back.

"Let her have a bruise or two," the Chief said. He walked to the wall and pushed a button. The wall slid back to reveal a call screen. The Chief dialled a number by hand and waited a moment. The face of a doctor appeared, his pure, stiff white collar standing up straight, his shaved skull gleaming in the blazing lights of the hospital.

"Pardon, sir," said the Chief, "But we have another one here. Poison, sir. I'll send her right over, if that is your wish."

The Doctor nodded his assent and the screen went blank.

"How do you know it was poison?" asked Romf as he followed the Chief out into the asceptic white corridor.

"She asked about the time." said the Chief. "They ask that to make sure they will die before they can get help. Then they make a speech about our terrible morals and our power madness. We let them go on, and when it hits them, we send for the Doctor. They don't realize that the poisons take a long time to work ; at least the ones they always seem to use. It takes a while after you lose consciousness for anything serious to happen. Most people don't know that there is more than one type of poison. One good thing about the censorship we have. You see, they just go to a sick-easy and ask for poison. But the guys who operate sick-easies are pretty careful. It costs a lot to get anything really deadly from them. If somebody dies of one of their poisons, and it gets traced, they are in trouble. So they sell stuff that is easy to cure if you're caught in time to talk. If you aren't, well, you die. I hate the pedlars worse than the fools who advocate it."

"Then Jelifa will live?" asked Romf.

"Oh hell yes," said the Chief.

"What will happen to her?"

"I'd guess that she really doesn't have any more information than she says she has. Her husband probably did all the dirty work, to cover her. In which case, with only minor criminal action against her, she will probably go in a psych house. Drugs for six months with psycho-therapy in somnolence, then released. After that she will probably go into a drug house of her own accord."

"I see," said Romf.

They walked down the white blazing corridor for several minutes. The Chief glanced at his associate and saw that the interrogation had upset him. It wouldn't do to have his agent upset. Then he remembered what the Thorenson woman had said about knowing Romf to be an agent.

"She knew about you, Romf," said the Chief.

"Eh?" said Romf, startled. "So she did. I wonder . . ."

"Look, this means I'll have to stay late and check out that Church," said the Chief. "I have some tickets to a show. Would you like to take them?"

"What's playing?" asked Romf.

"Something that will really take your mind off this business." said the Chief. "The Sterilettes. Neither male nor female. Completely sexless. Just the essence of humanity, none of the complications inherent in gender. Completely clean."

"Why thank you, Chief," said Romf, accepting the proferred tickets. "I think I'd like that. What do they do?"

"They sing," said the Chief. "About boats and cars and buildings. But get this, completely clean songs with no emotions. Not a sign of life." He spat the last word out.

Fat, ugly Mrs. Carson, she of the fabulous wealth, of the once dripping dewlap, the thin, spotty hair, yellow grey, was dying. Her room was shut tightly, well guarded, and nothing would intrude on her death.

It had been her hope to see the orchid destroy the frame of the window. She longed for the fresh, clean air, stinging and cold, to come pouring into the room and

cleanse things of their leprous smell, send ecstatic chills through her slowing body. She was afraid, now, that she would not last that long. She was desperately sorry.

Her doctor had informed Mrs. Carson that he could retard her death only by major regenerations. That would mean she would live another six months, and the pleasure of the orchid's triumph would be long past when she finally passed. In such a course also lay the temptation of eternal purgatory, a half-life of controlled disease. Mrs. Carson prided herself on being strong, and would not give in to that temptation.

Local anaesthetics kept the pain from being destructive in itself, kept it almost un-noticeable, for Mrs. Carson was past the stage of enjoying pain for its own sake. She did not have them remove her agonies completely. She was afraid that comfort would return her to the old despondency, the complacency, the dullness which in death she sought to escape.

She felt it coming. It was like a dark light, she thought. Like a place on the surface of the sun. A sunspot. The heat and brightness is not so great as that which is around it, yet still, and more, too bright for the human form, too hot for the soul of men, too much of pure energy to bear. A place where Life ends, and something, or nothing . . . begins . . .

The tendrils of the orchid tightened imperceptibly on the window frame. The orchid was *life,* pulsing, reaching with its sucking tendrils, draining nourishment from its dead supporter, the *frame,* covering, suffocating, clinging. It had covered the window completely in the short while of the last few months. Its long-thin, dark-thick leaves blotted out all the sunlight, made a wall around which beams of reflected evening tried to press. The brown and green blossoms quivered with the strength the plant was exerting. The plant drew and twisted, trying to reduce the window frame to more easily assimilable elements.

A sharp, cracking noise appeared in the air across the room, and dying Mrs. Carson opened her eyes for the last time. A shuddering, tinkling, relaxing, went through the orchid covered window. It remained a solid wall. No air came rushing through, no light filled the room with

dazzlement. Only a tiny breeze wafted past the edges of the broken casement. Only a few stray reflections penetrated the living wall.

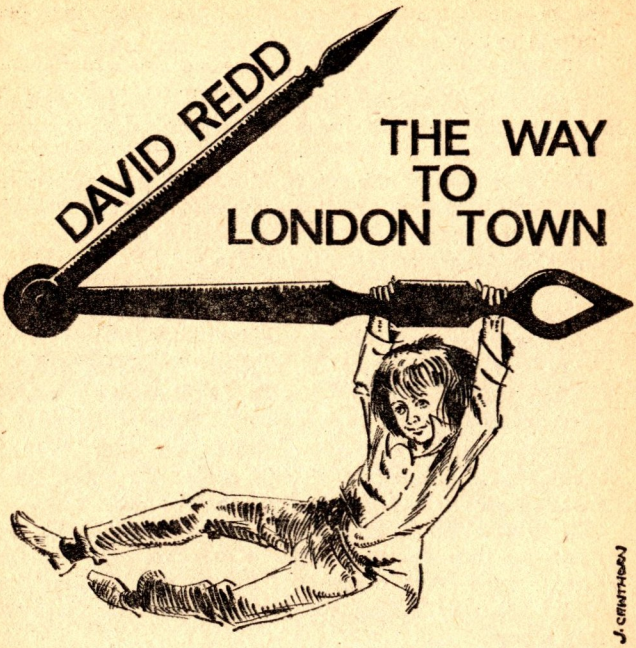
But with time, Mrs. Carson realized, the orchid would fall. The window had supported its mass, had supported its life, had been its food. The window and the frame were broken, and the plant, lacking rigidity, would use up that food. It would fall to a heap and wind its way down the wall to the ground. Or to a tree, and grow in a new shape, and a new direction.

Already the orchid felt its lack of support. Already it felt the chill of the outside air, from which it had been protected by an artificial environment.

It might even die, Mrs. Carson thought with remorse. The lovely brown and green flowers might never be worn by anyone but herself. Then she died.

DAVID REDD

THE WAY TO LONDON TOWN



UNDER THE BRIGHT summer sun, Nancy stood on the hillside above Sacaradown. She looked out over the city and smiled. Down there, people were busy with their everyday tasks, unaware that Nancy was about to descend on them. She smiled again and started walking down towards the buildings . . .

Trotting through the streets of Sacaradown, she listened to the myriad conversations going on around her. The language had changed slightly, but it was still the same tongue that had been spoken a hundred years ago. She would have no difficulty in understanding it.

Men and women bustled in and out of the shops. They saw the girl walking down the pavement, noticed vaguely that there was something odd about her clothes, and forgot her. Grown-ups were always the same.

I like this place, she thought. *The people are happy.*

The streets were clean and free from traffic. And the goods in the shops did not have the makeshift look of the products of her own time.

She had been wandering through the city for perhaps half an hour when she realised someone was watching her.

The man was middle-aged, stout but obviously still active, with light grey eyes the same colour as his thinning hair. He was gazing down at her with a faintly amused expression. Nancy stared back at him.

"You are a very self-assured young lady," he said in the soft musical tones of Sacaradown. "Who are you?"

"Nancy," she said, "Who're you?"

"My name is Walther," he replied. "I collect people."

"What sort of people?" Nancy asked, showing interest where an adult would have shown surprise or disbelief.

"Strange people. Especially children like you." Walther chuckled and pointed to a café across the road. "Will you allow me to buy you a drink in Wernher's?"

She would not have been Nancy if she had not accepted. So they found a table in the café and Wernher Hagen served them personally, for he and Walther had worked together during the reconstruction of Hamburg years before.

Walther put down his glass of Stellenbosch wine and studied the girl sipping her cloudberry squash. She could not be more than eleven years old. Her round face was pleasant rather than pretty, but her blue eyes were lively and her mop of corn-coloured hair would have been attractive if it had ever known a comb. *I should like to see you in five years' time,* Walther mused. *You are alive, and enjoying it.*

Nancy finished her drink. "That was nice. Thank you, kind sir."

Now a Sacaradown child would never say anything in that impish manner. Walther wished he could identify her accent. "Have you tasted cloudberries before?"

"Do you think I have?"

Walther had expected a straight no. Few ship-jumpers ever thought of evading a question ; most of them were only too eager to talk. He looked at her faded brown

shirt and scruffy jeans, and the battered watch on her left wrist. Where had those clothes been made?

He asked, "Where do you come from?"

"Where do you think I come from?"

"You are not being helpful!" His fingers toyed with the empty wineglass. "Worse still, you are not being typical!"

"Why should I be?" Her expression was now definitely mocking.

Walther shook his head. "You are a strange mixture. Why did you leave home?"

Her face lit up, giving him a sudden glimpse of the woman she would become. "Where was my home?"

"Don't you know?"

"*I* do. Do you?"

"I shall regard your answer as a challenge," said Walther. He stood up. "Come with me, Nancy. I intend to learn where you lived before coming here."

"How? Are you going to hypnotise me?"

"Nothing so crude. Cyril will read your past for me."

"That's gonna be interesting." She nodded. "I'll come."

"Do you know what is involved in reading the past?"

"No, but I'll soon find out."

For all she knew he could be planning to torture the information out of her, thought Walther. Had not her mother ever warned her about talking to strangers? She showed no trace of fear, and yet she did not behave as though she trusted him—for otherwise she would have answered his questions. She was unclassifiable.

Walking through the sunny streets, he saw that she was looking at the shop windows, as she had been doing when he first saw her. The sight of some fat juicy caterpillars on a butcher's slab appeared to upset her. Clearly she came from a country where insects were not raised for food. The southern hemisphere . . . Australia? New Zealand?

They came to a small shop which specialised in scientific apparatus. On the door was a duplicated poster advertising a forthcoming play, "Dawn of Magick," staged by a group of local amateurs.

Nancy glanced at the poster and followed Walther into the shop. It was pleasantly gloomy after the bright sunlight outside. The shelves and display cases were littered with various scientific instruments: pH meters, Geiger

counters, divining rods, planchettes, barometers, crystal balls, electronic spare parts and the like. Behind the counter a lanky black-haired youth laid down his book and greeted them. "Morning, Mr. Walther. What can I do for you?"

"This young lady has just arrived in Sacaradown. I would like to know where she came from."

"Certainly, Mr. Walther. Five royals, please."

Walther handed over the money. The youth went to a display case and took out a medium-sized crystal ball. Bringing it back to the counter, he set it down on something which looked like an ash-tray but wasn't. Nancy watched the preparations with interest.

"Mr. Walther, is this a check or a search?" asked the youth, polishing the crystal ball with a yellow cloth.

"It is a search, Cyril. I know nothing about her except her name—Nancy."

Cyril grinned. "You sure pick them!" Arms folded, he leaned on the counter and stared into the crystal ball. His hair fell into his eyes but he brushed it back. His gaze remained fixed on the centre of the transparent sphere, although the others could see nothing there.

Finally he straightened up. He regarded Nancy with something approaching awe. "Are you unique?"

She smiled. "I hope so."

"Cyril! Where does she come from?"

"Sorry, Mr. Walther. She was born and brought up in Medway Vale."

"Medway Vale!"

It was only twenty miles from Sacaradown. Walther had often been there on business. He looked at Nancy, trying to fit her into the society of Medway Vale, the prosperous little town nestling in the centre of the Downs. Outside the shop, a fire siren began wailing. It was the third time this week, but Walther did not notice the distant siren. He turned to Cyril. "It is impossible, she cannot be from Medway Vale. She does not belong to the social pattern at all."

He stopped. Perhaps they had answered him. He tried to remember what he had heard about the Australian laboratories, where the research scientists were examining the possibilities of reincarnation. But no, the work

had been abandoned, he recalled. His idea of Nancy's body harbouring a fugitive soul from the past was only an idea, and nothing more. He sighed, and his bafflement showed in the lines on his face.

Nancy relented. "I'll tell you."

"Should you?" asked Cyril, looking doubtful.

"Why not?" When Nancy decided to do something it turned out right or else. So she swung herself up to the counter, sat there on the polished wood and began to speak.

"Maybe I ought to lead up to this gradually, but I don't know how so I won't. Mr. Walther, I'm from the past. I was brought up in Medway Vale, but that was a hundred years ago. A hundred years to you, I mean."

Time travel? And why not? Once the Home had sheltered a drooling imbecile who could teleport himself a mile away from any real or imagined danger. Now here was someone who could teleport through time!

"One for the collection," said Cyril.

"His people collection?" asked Nancy suspiciously, turning round to stare at him.

"He runs a small hostel for ship-runners," Cyril explained. "He takes care of them until they can find work and settle down in the neighbourhood. It helps with his real work."

"I am a student of humanity," said Walther slowly. "When I see a man, I see his world reflected in his person. I have studied the effect of environment on personality for twenty years."

"He's writing a book about it," said Cyril.

"You were looking at me when I first saw you," she said, remembering the calm grey eyes watching her. "You were trying to fit me into a pattern."

"I was attempting to deduce where you had come from. My failure was annoying, but hardly surprising in the circumstances. Time travel——" He shook his head in child-like wonder.

"I am rather unique," said Nancy complacently.

"Tell me——" Cyril hesitated. "What are you doing here in Sacaradown?"

"I have to start somewhere," said Nancy, kicking her heels against the wooden panels of the counter front. "I

really want to explore London, but I need money for that."

"London!" Both Walther and Cyril gasped the name. To them, the vanished capital was as remote as Atlantis.

"Yes, London. That way." She pointed vaguely north. "All sorts of things were blown up in the Tuesday War, and I could salvage them. Like the Crown Jewels, maybe."

Walther had a vivid mental picture of Nancy, wandering through time and looting the world's great cities an instant before the bombs came down. Dazzling possibilities soared in his imagination.

"Well, if you want money," Cyril began, and laughed, "I could name some historians and collectors who'd rob a bank or two for you if you brought back a couple of items from the past. You could grab the Magna Carta and name your own price. Or if you went to Paris, there's the legendary Mona Lisa . . ."

"I am surprised you are not already a millionairess," said Walther, his thoughts still whirling.

"I said, I have to start somewhere. This is the best place—time, I mean—this is the best time for it. I can just go back a hundred and twenty years, pick out a few souvenirs and start counting the cash. Archaeologists here can give me the sort of money I want."

And that was true, for many art treasures and much scientific knowledge had been lost in the Tuesday War. Walther realised that Nancy had the power to completely change Sacaradown—and after Sacaradown, the world. It was incredible to think that so much could be done by this little girl sitting on the wooden counter, looking at him with angelic blue eyes. Angelic?

"I'll have a go at reading your future," said Cyril. "I feel in the mood for it." He retrieved his yellow cloth and dusted the crystal ball. Brushing back his hair, he stared into the sphere. Nancy waited expectantly: Walther noted that she was fully alert.

Suddenly the door opened, the bell jingled and into the shop came two tall policemen whom Walther knew slightly. Both had grim expressions. They saw Nancy perched on the counter and nodded to each other. The sergeant said "This is her all right, Mason."

"I plead not guilty," said Nancy instantly. "Besides, it was a pure accident and I'm awfully sorry I did it."

"Sorry you did what?" asked Mason, the constable.

"Whatever you think I did," said Nancy.

"This isn't the first time you've been arrested," said the sergeant.

"No sir," said Nancy, "but it's the first time I've been innocent."

Cyril looked up from the crystal ball and took in the scene. "They're here already. Don't worry, Nancy, you'll end up laughing at the lot of them."

The sergeant spoke to Walther. "Good morning, sir. Do you know anything about this—this girl here?"

"Nancy?" Walther smiled faintly. "I met her less than an hour ago. She—"

"An hour!" gasped the constable.

The sergeant frowned. He glanced at the door to reassure himself it was firmly shut. "Now sir, I should warn you that this is a more serious affair than you may imagine. A girl answering this description was seen in the Foreland Stores twenty minutes ago, shortly before a fire broke out on the premises."

"I heard no siren," said Walther.

"I did," said Cyril.

"Allow me to continue, sir. The Foreland Stores had recently been approached for insurance by Wolfson, and the staff were watching for suspicious behaviour. One of the clerks saw the girl suddenly run away from the wall, and was going over to her when an explosion occurred in the place she had been standing. Several other explosions followed immediately, and in the confusion the girl disappeared. The clerk informed us of the happenings at once, and a customer reported seeing the girl accompany you, sir, into the shop."

"So you think I started the fire," said Nancy, rather pleased at being notorious so soon after her arrival.

"The description is perfectly accurate," said the sergeant in gruff businesslike tones. "White, aged about ten or eleven, blue jeans and brown shirt in poor condition, blonde curly hair and, to quote the clerk, an expression of wide-eyed innocence."

"It sounds familiar," Nancy admitted, "But I've been

with Mr. Walther for the last hour and I've never even seen the Foreland Stores."

"Is this true, sir?" asked Constable Mason.

"It is," said Walther. He explained how he had met her.

"Hmm," said the sergeant. Walther had worked with the police to help lost ship-jumpers, and was known to most of them by reputation if not personally. This was one defence witness who could not be ignored, and yet . . .

"Sir, I'm afraid we'll have to take her along for identification. The clerk's description was too accurate for my liking. And if she wasn't there, who did the clerk see?"

"I've done a paradox again," said Nancy. "Why did that clerk have to go looking for trouble?"

The policemen glanced at each other, puzzled.

Cyril, who had not spoken for the past few minutes, said "You see, Nancy, there's a bunch of crooks selling fire insurances to the shopkeepers. If you don't buy their 'Insurance' your shop goes up in smoke. It's the old protection racket. The police know who the men are, except for the firebug himself, but they can't get any evidence against them. That's why they came galloping after you. They don't know how the gang starts the fires, and they thought you were their first lead. Just by the way, the *real* fire insurance companies are offering a twenty thousand royal reward for anyone who can get the gang convicted. Interested?"

"Yeah!" said Nancy, seeing the money for her London explorations almost within her grasp. She jumped down from the counter and went to the door: with her fingers on the handle she stopped and looked back at the startled policemen. "Well, let's go. What are you waiting for?"

The Foreland Stores occupied a large white building just past the monorail station. An orange fire engine was parked outside it. There appeared to be little damage, although there was a strong smell of smoke and a stream of water was slowly dripping through the open door. The fact that the place was still in good condition was a tribute to the efficiency of the fire service, which had had some good practice lately. Walther saw there were fewer spectators than usual. The fires were no longer such a novelty.

Inside the building, the policemen took Nancy and Walther to the main warehouse where the fire had been. The floor was a smeary mess of ashes and dirty water, and the piles of wooden crates at the far end were charred or soaked or both. Little groups of men and women were mournfully surveying the debris.

One of the men was Phillips, the clerk who had raised the alarm, and the sergeant took Nancy over to him for identification. Walther saw the Chief Constable, his old friend Mark Lefevre, watching the experts searching for clues to the source of the fire.

"Good morning, Mark. Is it the same as the others?"

Lefevre glanced at him and nodded tiredly. "Spontaneous combustion, as ever was."

"Lovely phrase, that. Spontaneous combustion!" said an irreverent fireman who was admiring the sodden chaos he had helped create.

"Was so much of the stock destroyed?" asked Walther, gesturing towards the crates at the far end. "The warehouse is scarcely a quarter full!"

"Wright—the manager—is expecting a big shipment of cloth this afternoon," said Lefevre. "It should have arrived yesterday, but it was delayed by the rail crash at Brighton."

Nancy and the sergeant returned, with the grey-dressed clerk Phillips. The sergeant spoke to Lefevre. "This is the girl, sir. Mr. Phillips has identified her beyond all doubt."

"She has been with me for the last hour," said Walther quickly.

Before Lefevre could sort out the contradiction, Nancy said "Mr. Chief Constable, I'd like to speak to you alone."

The fireman grinned knowingly. "Watch out, chief!"

"As if I would!" said Nancy indignantly. She had no intention of letting any man get his hands on her, not until she was old enough to fetch a good price as a virgin in the slave markets of 2300 A.D.

"I think I understand," said Walther. "Nancy, it is pointless to indulge in secrecy at this stage."

And he explained that Nancy was a mutant, born after the Tuesday War, with the ability to travel through time at will. He concluded ". . . And with her powers, she is quite confident she can collect the necessary evidence to convict the criminals."

"If it is a pyrotic mutant, I can catch him in the act," said Nancy.

Lefevre was looking doubtful, not without reason. "But these are definite explosions, not simple ignitions . . . And the mutation rate's so low these days . . ."

"It must be a pyrotic," said Nancy impatiently. "What else could it be?"

"Why don't you go see for yourself?" suggested the fireman: he had been listening with cynical interest. "That's where the fire started."

He was pointing to a ragged black hole in the wall, where the wood and plaster had been completely burned away. There were two others like it further along the wall. Some experts were examining the holes in the vain hope of finding bomb fragments.

"Are those men looking for explosives?" Nancy asked.

"Yes, but they won't find any," said Lefevre. "Our analysts have checked other buildings after visits from the firebug, and all the tests for incendiary chemicals proved negative."

"I told you it was a pyrotic," said Nancy. "I'll go and look. What time did the fire start?"

"A few seconds after five past ten," said Lefevre. "It's ten forty-five and a half now."

Nancy carefully corrected her watch. She walked over the damp ashes, avoiding the larger puddles, and went up to the left of the group of experts. Then she slid herself thirty-eight minutes into the past.

The hall was clean and intact, and she was alone except for a clerk checking the crates at the far end. She recognised the clerk—he was Phillips. If there was a bomb, she should be able to see it. She bent down by the wall and searched, even running her hands over the wood and plaster, looking for any trace that something had been concealed in the wall. She found nothing. It must be a pyrotic, then.

Phillips had stopped checking the crates and was looking at her. "Hey! What are you doing over there?"

It was nearly time for the first explosion. She dashed away from the wall into the middle of the warehouse.

There was a sharp crack—like the sound of a whip, only many times louder—and a blinding fireball flashed

into being on the wall. A blast of unbearable heat seared against her: she flung herself back into the future and was rewarded with cool air and normal light. Purple after-images danced before her eyes. Her skin was still tingling. She patted her hair, wondering if any had been burned off, but it seemed to be all there.

The others were still watching the place she had disappeared. She called "I'm here!" and ran up to them.

"Was it a pyrotic?" asked the cheerful fireman. Seeing her vanish must have convinced him she really could travel in time.

Nancy shook her head dolefully. "I never saw a pyrotic do anything like that."

"I knew it, we're back where we started," Lefevre groaned.

"That could have been teleportation," said Phillips thoughtfully. "When you went back in time just then, where was I standing?"

"By those crates over there—just past where that man in white is. Hold it, I saw what that explosion was like. How did you get out of the warehouse alive?"

"There's a door behind the crates. You can't see it from here." Phillips turned to Lefevre. "That proves it, I think. She *was* in two places at the same time."

"We have to accept that now, however incredible it may seem," said Lefevre. "You must all agree, Nancy is our best hope of breaking up Wolfson's protection circle, as things stand."

"Best hope? Our *only* hope!" said the sergeant, who was still standing with them.

"But will you help us?" asked Lefevre.

"She will be delighted to help," said Walther. "She wants the reward offered by the insurance companies, for her trip to London."

"London?" Lefevre blinked.

"Never mind," said Nancy. "Mr. Walther's right. All I have to do is track down this gang, find out how they set fire to the shops and tell the police. Then I just collect the reward. Twenty thousand royals, Cyril said."

"It sounds so simple when she says it," sighed the sergeant.

"Now you try doing it, my girl," the fireman told her.

the "insurance policies," and Ed Briggs, a tough ex-convict who acted as a general handyman. There was believed to be a fourth, the man who actually started the fires, but nobody had ever seen him. Nancy's job was to get photographs or voice recordings so that the mysterious firebug could be identified. She was going to go back in time to last night, carrying a small camera and a wire recorder.

"Wolfson and Samuels were at home last night," Lefevre had said. "They could have had a last-minute conference with the firebug about this morning's attack on the Foreland Stores."

Nancy had studied the police maps, and the photographs of Wolfson, Samuels and Briggs. It all appealed to her sense of humour, although Lefevre and Walther saw nothing funny in the situation.

She finished studying the villa and checked her equipment. Camera, recorder—both on a necklace so that they would resemble lucky charms or lockets—and a bag of dry earth. "Okay, I'm ready. I'll go now."

"Take care of yourself," said Lefevre earnestly.

Nancy sniffed—she always ignored this sort of advice—and slid into the previous night. The warm sunlit wood was replaced by pale shadows looming out of the darkness. She walked slowly down the lane towards the main road, letting her eyes grow accustomed to the faint light of the quarter moon. There were no clouds, but there was an orange glow in the sky above Sacaradown.

Reaching the road, she made her way to the villa. Her footsteps sounded horribly loud in the lonely night, even though the only noise came from loose gravel scraping beneath her feet.

The gate was open. She padded up the concrete path to the front door. The curtains of the living room were drawn, but they were thin and the light from the room sent a warm glow over the smooth lawn sloping down to the road. Despite this, she would have ample cover. A few ornamental bushes grew on the lawn, clipped into the shapes of giant chessmen, and she could lie in wait behind those. She could smell wallflowers somewhere nearby.

Had the firebug turned up already? She went to the

window, hoping to see into the room. But however thin the curtains might be, there were no gaps in them. She could hear piano music and a couple of male voices, but that was all. There was no way of knowing whether the firebug was in the house or not.

Nancy did not intend to wait all night for the firebug to arrive or depart. She sprinkled the dry earth from her bag over a small section of the path, spreading it thinly so that the firebug would not be able to avoid treading on it. Then she went over the lawn, glancing warily at the lighted window, and stood behind a large bush shaped like a Knight. She slipped twenty minutes forward in time, came out from behind the bush and examined the earth on the path. It was undisturbed. She went back behind the Knight and slid forward another twenty minutes. There were still no footprints in the earth. She repeated the process twice, and each time the pale moon sailed a little nearer the dark horizon.

At last there were footprints! They were long, thin, pointing towards the villa. The firebug had arrived, some time in the past twenty minutes, and he was still in the house. Nancy hurriedly brushed the earth off the path—there was no need to let it stay there.

Taking cover behind the Knight again, Nancy slid back nineteen minutes and settled down to wait. The slow piano music drifted across on the warm air, its recorded emotions blending with the fragrance of the wallflowers and giving a strange sense of peace to the timeless atmosphere of the night.

She heard the car long before it arrived, and was ready for it when it drew up outside the gate. She fingered the miniature camera on her necklace.

The light, tapping footsteps were those of a woman! Nancy could see the newcomer walking up the path, and smell her perfume as she approached. This wasn't the visitor she wanted—or was the firebug a woman?

Nancy saw her come up to the door, press the bell and wait. Presently a light came on in the hall, and the door opened. A square, muscular man—Ed Briggs— was standing in the hall. He grunted something and the woman stepped inside. Nancy decided a back view was better than nothing and took a picture. Just as Briggs was closing

the door, the woman turned to take off her coat and Nancy hastily pressed the shutter button again—too late.

The woman had been young, black-haired and of medium height. But the things Nancy noticed were her worried expression and the small but bulging brown handbag she carried. If this was the firebug, she was not a willing member of Wolfson's gang.

The next step was to listen at the window, so she did. The piano music had stopped and the first thing she heard was a man's voice saying "Sherry, my dear?" She instantly detested the owner of the voice. The man went on, "You brought the bombs, I trust?"

The reply was low and indistinct.

"Excellent!" said the man. "The reserve will be useful."

That was enough. Nancy unclipped the recorder, activated it and placed it on the window-sill to do its work. Now she had to get a picture of the woman. She went up to the villa, looking for a way in.

One of the side windows was open. This was too easy! She hopped in through the window, advanced into the darkened room and immediately fell over a chair. It sounded like the end of the world, she told herself fiercely. If they hadn't heard that they must be deaf. Still, she had to get that picture. She stood up and cautiously moved forward.

Heavy thumping footsteps sounded in the passage: the door opened, the bedroom was flooded with light and there stood Ed Briggs, his massive bulk towering over her. His ugly features took on a look of amazement as he saw her. "'Ere, what the hell's this?"

Her next action was most unladylike, she told herself happily. She belted him one in the crutch, then as his hands came down instinctively she grabbed his arm and pulled. He was already slightly bent over, and she managed to jerk him off balance. Briggs staggered clumsily and fell, seemingly descending in slow motion. Nancy jumped up, gave him a perfect karate chop to the back of his neck and watched him collapse. The thud as he hit the floor was like a minor earthquake, she thought with satisfaction. She wondered what Lefevre or Walther would say if they could see her now.

It would be nice to stay and savour her triumph, but

she had work to do. Now where was the living room?

She ran into the passage, saw an open door, dashed through, and stopped dead. Her hand flew to her throat—and, incidentally, to her camera.

Wolfson, Samuels and the dark-haired woman were sitting around the fire as if it was an ordinary social evening. A small coffee table was by the chairs, and on it were some sherry glasses, a brown handbag and six dull grey objects, egg-shaped, like small hand grenades. Samuels frowned in surprise and opened his mouth to speak.

Nancy turned and ran. No sense in staying any longer! She fled back to the bedroom, tripped over Briggs, picked herself up and threw herself out of the window. She was down the path and running along the main road before she paused for breath.

Back in the lane, she slid into the sunny afternoon where Walther and Lefevre were waiting for her. She was annoyed to discover that her heart was pounding loudly.

"Did you get anything?" Lefevre asked anxiously.

"Course I did!" She poured out the tale of her adventures. When she had finished, Walther said "But, Nancy, if you wanted to get a photograph of this woman, why didn't you wait until she was leaving the house?"

She bit her lip. "I didn't think of that! I just went ahead and did it."

"Another thing," said Lefevre, pointing to her necklace. "There's the camera, but where's the recorder?"

"Oh, I forgot! I left it on the window-sill!"

"Such efficiency!" said Lefevre. "You'd think she was working for the Government!"

"What do we do now?" asked Walther.

"We'll pick up that recorder, if it's still there, and go back to the station. If the evidence is half as good as Nancy claims, I'll swear out some warrants and have them pulled in right away. When we arrest them we'll take the opportunity to search Wolfson's house again—some of those 'hand grenades' might still be around. It's worth a try."

Some hours later, Nancy and Walther were with Lefevre in a large room at the Sacaradown police station. On the

table before them were two of the three "hand grenades" which had been found when the police went through Wolfson's villa. The young police analyst who had examined the third was describing the mysterious devices.

"It baffles me," he confessed. "I don't see how they can do anything, let alone cause fires."

"The outer casing is lead," said Walther, scratching one with his thumbnail.

"That's all there is," said the analyst. "It's made of lead, roughly cast into the shape of a hollow egg. The top screws off."

"So it does," said Lefevre, trying it. "Water!"

"Yes, sir. The things contain ordinary tap water, and nothing else."

"These screw threads won't last," said Lefevre. "They're losing their shape already. Why didn't they use some harder metal, iron perhaps?"

The analyst shrugged.

"What's this?" asked Nancy, pointing to a small blob of grey-white metal on the top of the egg Lefevre had opened.

"That's platinum," said the analyst. "Pure platinum. Don't ask me why!"

Lefevre screwed the top back on the egg, being careful not to spill any water. "What else can you tell us about these miserable objects?"

"Nothing, sir. You know as much about them as we do!"

Lefevre turned to Walther. "It is for this that we spend thousands from the ratepayers' money equipping our magnificent new scientific analysis laboratory. And yet Samuels referred to these as the bombs, and Nancy's recording makes it quite plain these lead water-bottles start the fires."

"I didn't see one at the Foreland Stores," said Nancy. "All I saw was the fireball."

The analyst said nothing. He was not used to a situation in which his precise scientific instruments could do no better than mere human senses.

A uniformed constable appeared at the door. "The

girl's here now, sir. We haven't had a statement yet, but she's willing to talk. Do you want her in here, sir?"

"Yes, bring her in. And Wolfson too."

Samuels had broken a leg trying to escape, and Briggs had made the mistake of fighting it out with the policeman who arrested him. They were now in hospital, but their absence did not matter. Wolfson and the young dark-haired woman were the important ones.

"I hope they hurry up and confess so I can collect the reward," said Nancy with unashamed greed.

"Max Wolfson and Rita Rebecca Smith," announced the constable, and the prisoners were ushered in. Behind them came a middle-aged man with glasses who was obviously a clerk of some sort. Bearing a large briefcase, he came over to Walther.

"This is Mr. Harries from the Kentland South Insurance Company," said Walther to Nancy. "His company alone has had to pay out over half a million royals in insurance because of these fires."

They all sat down around the table. The analyst picked up one of the bombs, unscrewed the top and stared moodily at the pieces. Wolfson and the woman, Rita Smith, each had a constable on either side of them. Wolfson was glaring at Lefevre defiantly, but Rita's face was pale and blank. Her expression was completely empty, as though she had stopped thinking altogether. It reminded Nancy of a dead woman she had seen once.

"This is being recorded, but it's not a formal statement," said Lefevre to the prisoners. "Now, would you care to tell us who invented these remarkable objects?"

"Go to hell!" snarled Wolfson.

Lefevre had expected this. "Have you anything to say, Miss Smith?"

"Samuels designed them for me," she replied. Her slow speech was without accent, and without emotion. "He wanted a bomb that could operate without explosives——"

"Rita!" snapped Wolfson. "You don't have to talk!"

She gazed at him with dreadfully expressionless eyes. "I should have killed you at the beginning."

"Let her continue, Wolfson!" said Lefevre. "Miss

Smith, we know how you teleported the bombs into the shops. . ."

He paused, enjoying the sensation he had caused among his staff. Nancy mentally kicked herself for overlooking the obvious. There was an excuse for the others, they were not so accustomed to living among mutants, but she had been brought up just after the atomic war and she should have thought of a teleport right away, once she had seen the fireball appear out of nothing. And she had been so near! After all, she had thought of a pyrotic . . .

"However," Lefevre went on, "we do not yet understand the principles behind the bombs. Could you enlighten us?"

This was it. If Rita explained the method, the case would be wrapped up.

"It is very simple," said Rita, still without a trace of emotion. "I am not a good teleport. Unless I concentrate very hard, the object disintegrates. So I teleported these bombs loosely, and they disintegrated."

"Wait a minute!" cried the analyst. "That means it becomes a cloud of monatomic gases!"

"Have you got it?" asked Lefevre quickly.

"Yes!" said the analyst joyfully. "It's brilliant! The water becomes hydrogen and oxygen and instantly expands through the shell of lead powder. The lead has become pyrophoric and explodes—and there's your fireball!"

Lefevre exchanged glances with his men, who were just as baffled as he was. "Why does it explode?"

"The lead powder is the explosive," the analyst explained eagerly. He picked up the opened bomb and gestured wildly with it. "The more finely divided a substance is, the more chemically active it is. And the lead and hydrogen and oxygen are divided right down to the individual atoms. In that state they're so damned reactive they have to explode!"

"The platinum is a catalyst," said Rita. She reached out and touched the top of the bomb the analyst had opened. "When I teleport it——"

Crack! And Wolfson's head disappeared in a miniature

fireball, and the men desperately flung themselves away from the searing flames . . .

Nancy and Walther were alone with Lefevre in the Chief Constable's office. Wolfson's body was in the mortuary, the men who had been burned were in hospital, and Rita Smith was in the cells after making her statement.

We should have known this would happen," said Lefevre. "Wolfson had only kept his hold over her by threatening to go to the police, and when we pulled the gang in she realised we would find out everything whatever she did. So she took her revenge on Wolfson."

"Good thing too," said Nancy approvingly. "I'm glad he got his chips."

"And she looks such an angel on the surface," Lefevre sighed.

"Of course, children see people as either good or bad," said Walther. "It is black and white, with no shades of grey at all. Rita was an enemy of Wolfson's, therefore she is good, despite the fact that she is just as dangerous a criminal as he was."

"I think Nancy saw Rita as a kindred spirit," said Lefevre. "By the way, Nancy, you remember Harries from Kentland South Insurance?"

Nancy nodded; Lefevre reached in a drawer and pulled out a wad of currency notes. "Twenty thousand royals. Two bundles of one hundred notes each."

She jumped up on the desk, sitting there as if she owned the place, and graciously accepted the money. She started counting it.

"Look at her," said Lefevre sadly. "Lord help the Londoners when she's let loose in their city!"

"Lord help us all," said Walther. "She won't rest until she has the world in the palm of her hand."

Nancy looked up, grinned, and went on counting her loot.

KRIS NEVILLE

THE OUTCASTS

EAST FIFTH STREET in Los Angeles is the street of derelicts. Passed by time, transcended by obscure events, the forgotten people shuffle with bowed heads into a lonely and nameless eternity.

Often the women there, old and brittle, dress in a finery of time gone by. They rouge their cheeks and paint their lips and dye their hair. Beneath red, the ravage shows.

The girls there, too, are old. Childhood is the lost memory of a sigh: a place that can neither be forgotten nor remembered. Often the girls dress in gay formals at noon. The formals are stained with perspiration and are without flowers. They rouge their cheeks and paint their lips and bleach their hair. But rather than being brittle, as are the women, the girls are merely mechanical.

The men, old and young, dress in cast-off clothing or in clothing that has been worn too long and washed or cleaned until the vitality has been removed. There are few beards, but fewer still are smooth shaven. The complexion of the Caucasians is an all-pervasive sallow; their exposed parts are sallow and their covered parts are sallow. Darker skins are ashen.

Here and there are the new ones. There are the young girls who are not yet old and mechanical but in the process of being passed downward through the hands of the pushers. Soon, for them, love will become another word no more real or meaningful than truth, beauty and justice. There are the young men, still with the dream behind their eyes. But it will pass.

So, on East Fifth Street, in Los Angeles, the young and old spin their destinies against the harsh background of the sounds of the city.

At noon there is almost hope. There is a brief infusion of office workers, clad in bright new suits and clean white shirts or in colourful skirts and starched blouses.

But even then the air does not change. The air is per-

meated with the smell of automobile exhausts and warm bodies and fried foods and alcohol and the sweet smell of drugs. The sun is hidden by eye-stinging fumes.

At noon the sounds increase in tempo—the clatter of high-heeled shoes, the roar and cough of automobiles and the whisper and cry of human voices. These sounds intermingle. Listen for a while and they become not many sounds but one great, sad sound that fears to roar too loud in protest.

An hour later, the sounds will sigh away to a weary whimper; the heat will slowly increase, and the acrid fumes coming in from the industrial districts and the refineries to the southeast will become more penetrating.

The apparition did not arrive at a quiet time. He arrived at high noon, amid the growing bitterness in the air and amid the beginning of the weary heat. He touched first the sounds. Around him as he walked there fell a cone of silence. It was as though a cold breath had come that froze voices and halted movement.

His pace was neither fast nor slow. It was evident that he need not hurry, for he was no nearer the end of his journey than when he had started. It was evident, too, that he need not slacken his pace; for those things which he saw he had seen before and there was no novelty to arrest his attention.

Drivers turned frozen faces toward him and looked away in horror. Pedestrians were transfixed, mouths twisted and agape. Heads turned to follow his progress, and eyes filled with hatred and loathing.

He was indifferent to this—indifferent to the cone of silence, indifferent to the city, indifferent to the reaction with which he was greeted. He walked down the middle of East Fifth Street. Cars halted as he approached. He weaved between them without varying his stride. He walked as though it were merely necessary to consume a given distance before the fall of night.

After he passed on, life resumed again, slowly at first and then more and more quickly. Automobiles moved. Horns blared impatiently against the sudden, inexplicable congestion. Conversations resumed. The veil lifted.

The man walked on.

New spectators shuddered and sought hiding places where there were none. They sucked in their breaths and turned away to flee a few steps in nameless terror.

On he came, down the middle of East Fifth Street, his eyes fixed ahead, his pace steady.

The girl stepped out of the Tip Top Bar. It was one of the bars on East Fifth that was off limits to service personnel. She was greeted by the oppressive heat and the moist congestion.

Her hair was blonde and turning dark at the roots. Her cheeks were rouged and her lips were painted. Her body stood in the doorway and stretched mechanically. Her eyes surveyed the street. They saw what a stranger's could not: a plainclothed policeman, another prostitute, a teenage girl looking for a fix, a pimp, a bookmaker, the man the teenager was searching for, a fat woman who sold marijuana cigarettes at fifty cents each, a thief, a sexual psychopath, and a young man who preyed upon homosexuals. This was her hard, mechanical world. It was set in motion by an unknown force and jangled along endlessly in accord with an obscure and repetitious logic she could not comprehend. Tomorrow, the faces might change, but the world would not.

Her hard eyes acknowledged it, and leisurely standing in the doorway of the bar, she lighted a cigarette and blew smoke gratefully into the quiet air. She showed her legs and hips to an advantage out of habit rather than hope. The signs at noon were never propitious.

Her veiled eyes accepted open stares of sensuous curiosity from the men and blunted hostility from the women. She accepted them alike with an inward shrug: Yeah, big man? So what, baby blue eyes? She thought mechanical obscenities at them.

She lived in a cheap rooming house a few blocks away. She paid fifty dollars a month rent and always prefaced any fleeting thought of her landlord with the phrase, "That bastard." She did most of her work in cheap hotel rooms and sometimes she managed to get a kickback from the bellhop if the tip were large enough.

At the moment, she had twenty-six dollars and change. She was hungry. She wanted a drink. Maybe if she ate something, she could sit in as a B-girl for an hour or so

in the afternoon and pick up some drinks at Joe's Cosmo Grill, for kicks, down the street. Maybe she even could find a trick for the afternoon, if she were lucky.

Her rent was due.

She stood encased in an abrasive indifference, considering alternatives. She thought a few more obscenities at the passers-by. She sized up the men, out of habit. That young animal-thing with the long, easy stride, was the hot-handed, eager type, fast, savage, and then it would be over with. Not too bad. The old animal-thing passing, dressed like a man of importance, would be a romantic reformer with his gentle fumbling and stale smell and ultimate perversion. There were worse. And this one: a man, but so what? Happily married, probably. The type you sometimes get at conventions.

She wondered when the hell they were going to have another convention downtown. Those were good times.

She thought it would be just her luck to get busted again, trying too hard to make the rent. The last time was nearly four months ago. She was overdue.

She thought she ought to eat.

She winked the tears of smoke from her eyes. The misty sun seemed loud and bright after the murky darkness of the bar.

Depression came. This was not her day; it was all wrong. She felt a fleeting moment of insecurity. The people around her were suddenly unreal. The world was no longer her home. She was a permanent transient. She responded to the thought with a monotonous string of obscenities. The obscenities extended themselves until they assumed for her a fascination. The blunt, dead world of vulgarity contained infinite combinations.

She silently asked a passing office girl: What would you think, doll-innocent-filth, if you knew I was thinking about a man in *this* way and *this* way and this? The girl in her stiff, clean blouse was propelled along on hurrying feet nowhere.

Then she glanced to her left and saw the man walking in silence down the middle of East Fifth Street.

The man, since he cannot be remembered, cannot be

described. But since he cannot, really, ever be forgotten, description is unnecessary.

Tall, short, slim or stout, these are matters of conjecture. Think about it for a moment.

Think about it for a moment.

Draw up your own picture. What is the colour of the eyes, the hair, the skin? What is the shape of the hands? What is the sound of the voice? And what is the colour and the texture of the ageless dusty clothing and the footwear?

He has come through rain and snow and bitter sunshine. He has walked down highways shimmering with summer heat, across fields sprinkled with spring flowers, through piled drifts of white winter and among the dying leaves of uncounted autumns. He has crossed and recrossed deserts and mountains, from cold into heat and then into cold again. The seasons and the endless weary miles have not aged the traveller. And inside the skull, there is a brain, a living, pulsing organ traced with the delicate lines of other times and other faces.

Think for a moment.

What of the face? And remember the expression in the eyes?

Perhaps you have seen this figure in a crowded street at noon, walking in the cone of silence; or perhaps, more terrible, more frightening, more unimaginable—

Out of the blackness that surrounds the house, there is a hollow, hesitant knock. Fresh with thoughts of the world, you open the door to the night. The face peers at you out of the darkness; the tongue speaks. There is an indescribable chill of pure terror and disgust that freezes in your blood. You gasp, cry out, stumble back, look away . . . The traveller is gone; the night has swallowed him. Your heart races, then flutters in confusion, and then is once more quiet. And he . . . was no more. You stand for a moment, puzzled, at the door. Why are you here? A shiver comes. You know not what has happened.

But would you not, this moment, cry out if you were suddenly confronted again with the face? Would there not be a cry well up in your throat from the forgotten depths of your being, where terror dwells?

And the voice. You cannot forget the voice. The phone

silent streets to his own, or to her own, eternity, and she wanted to lose her lostness in this greater lostness.

Other sounds came again. The memory was fading. She tried to cling to the memory.

There was a man—

There was—

There—

But it was gone; or perhaps not gone but just not remembered. Something strange had happened to her but it defied analysis. Wonderingly, she put a hand to the cheek, and wonderingly looked down at the unfamiliar moisture on her fingertips.

She sobbed, and her voice could not rise beyond a sob nor reach out and call back something lost forever.

Not knowing whom she meant, she whispered, "He understands," and the whisper was a hollow sound in a cavern of dry tears.

THE GOD KILLERS

John Baxter

Conclusion

eight

IT TOOK a few moments for David to accept the evidence of his eyes. Seen from so far above, the valley and its farms seemed toy-like and unreal. Surely that couldn't be the real Padgett farmhouse burning down there? It must be an illusion of some kind, or a dream. The old clichés

assumed new meanings as he considered their suggestions. The things he was watching had to be in a dream; they were too fantastic to be real. But the smoke rolled down the valley in a way that was all too natural. Dream smoke was gauzy and fine. This as black, greasy and thick. As he hurried along the road he could almost smell its acrid tang.

By the time he had reached the floor of the valley he had come close for the second time that day to the end of his physical resources, but as before his desperation kept him going. As he ran along the road the landscape seemed to waver blackly about him, twisting as if seen through Penn's distorted eye-glasses. For a while he put it down to weariness. Then the darkness thickened momentarily and he looked up to see the smoke from the burning house laid like a scarf of black mist over his head. It blocked out most of the sky, and he knew then that he was close to the farmhouse.

Pausing for a moment to regain his breath, he saw that the country around him was becoming more familiar. This was Padgett land, though he hardly recognised it in the yellow light of the smoke-filled dusk. At the top of the next rise he would be able to look down on the home fields. He almost dreaded doing so, because he knew at the back of his mind what was happening there and why the house was on fire. As he topped the hill his suspicions were confirmed. Three black wagons stood in the field, surrounded by a group of men whose faces were covered by long masks. The Examiners had gathered for an inquisition.

From the hill he could see everything that happened. The home paddocks were alive with people stung into frenzied activity like an exploded ant-nest. Some stood about in groups, talking, but most seemed to be busy with bundles and vehicles. In front of the burning house huge piles of material had been built up. Almost everything in the house would be there for the Examiners to pray over and purify. People swarmed over the piles, loading objects into handcarts and horse drays. Dominating the whole scene and lighting it like an open furnace the burning farm stood impotent, chained in flames. As David watched, the upper levels of the house began slowly to

tumble, toppling into the cathedral of flames beneath. Even a mile away he could hear the sliding roar of masonry as it crumbled into the ruin.

The road from the farm was thick with people, most of them laden with loot from the farm. It was usual for the goods of a proscribed person to be distributed among the first comers, after, of course, the most valuable had been taken by the Examiners themselves. These people were probably the tenant farmers from Padgett and Stoker properties. David slipped off the road and hid in a small grove of trees while they passed. Silhouetted against the darkening sky their figures had a look of unreality about them, as if an artist had cut a moving frieze into the sunset. The poses were familiar; the man of the family, his back bent with a heavy load, trudging up hill, his wife behind him, wearily working between the shafts of a handcart, the children and old people all bearing some burden. This was how life was on Merryland. David did not really begrudge these people their meagre loot. They probably deserved it more than most.

When the first group had gone he went to the verge of the road and looked towards the farm. There was another cart coming, faster this time, with two people drawing it. He slipped back into the shadows, until something in the movements of these people struck him as familiar. Walking back to the edge of the road, he waited for them to reach him. As the man and woman came close, they slowed. From their sudden return to servility, David saw that they recognised him.

"Master David?" the woman said uncertainly.

"Yes, it's me," David said, stepping forward. "How are you, Wheatley?"

The couple stared at him suddenly. The woman was less vicious than her husband, but her cringing servility hid a cruel and sadistic nature. Together they made an unattractive though well-matched pair. Wheatley stood glowering in the centre of the road, hunched between the shafts of the cart like a stupid beast. David knew he would have knocked him down if he had been able, the man had obviously worn himself out dragging the heavy cart from the farm. It was well loaded, far fuller than those of the other peasants who had gone by earlier. And

second best, including most of the contents of the armoury. David looked over the collection of weapons. Most of them were rusted beyond all hope of use, but some of the blades had stood up well. At the very bottom of the heap he found a thin sharp knife about a foot long which was unmarked by even a touch of rust. From its weight and the blank simplicity of its hilt he knew that it dated from before the wars. It would never rust, never break and never lose its edge. Carefully he tucked it into his belt. None of the pistols were any good, but he took instead a leather and spring-steel bludgeon weighted with lead. It was only a few inches long but he had seen Garth kill a bull with one, bringing it to its kness with a single blow to the skull. The two pieces made him well-armed, but only for close quarters. Still, it would have to do. He looked down at Wheatley. The man was still unconscious. David wondered for a moment what to do about his loot. It would be wrong to let him keep it, but there was no way it could be taken from him. Then he had an idea. Taking the cart he dragged it down the hill to where the ground levelled off. The ditches here were full of slimy stagnant water, and he emptied the cart into the deepest of them. By the time Wheatley woke up and found his cart, the things in it would be thoroughly ruined. Then he hurried along the road towards the home fields. It was already night and soon the Examiners would be starting their worst work.

David left the road and made his way along the verge towards the house. The night and the light of the burning house both worked in his favour, making the shadows move restlessly, providing good cover. Although dozens of people went along the road only a few yards from him, he was not seen. After a while the flood of refugees and looters dried up as the last of the spoils were distributed and the place was left to the Examiners. David moved closer to the road, walking more quickly and with an increased urgency. By the time he reached the bridge spanning the creek the road was empty. He struggled across the stream and, under cover of the bridge, rejoined the road. As he did so an unfamiliar shape made him start back. He looked closer and saw that the way was barred by two crossed timbers. At the end of each was the three-

lobed trefoil of the Examiner's interdict. Once, such a sign had indicated a radiation hazard, but the Examiners had adopted it as a warning that there were less palpable dangers ahead. David ignored it and moved hurriedly along the road. He did not have much time.

By night, and lit by the burning house at one end of it, the home field was eerie and unreal. David had to look at it for a long time before he made out the familiar objects, the haystacks, barns and ditches that gave it individuality. The fire lit the whole field with blazing horizontal light, each object throwing a block of hard shadow on to the ground beside it. In the centre of the field, beyond the circle of highest heat, a group of people had gathered. There were about twenty of them, and they stood about in loose casual attitudes. It could have been a social gathering of some sort but for the bizarre setting and the masks that all of them wore. David wondered where the Padgetts were being kept until he saw the guard lounging against the wall of a small feed shed. They must be inside.

He looked around, searching for some sort of plan, but nothing seemed to offer much hope. There were too many of them to fight, and he knew enough of his own ability to realise that even in a fair fight with only one of them he would have little chance of winning. He needed a trick. Carefully he worked out the relationship of the various objects in the field, trying to visualise it like a chess game or an exercise with toy soldiers. The men grouped in the middle, the prisoners to one side, the barn in the corner of the field nearest to him (providing handy cover, he noted), the burning house. As he watched the house, there was a dull concussion somewhere inside the ruin as a drum of oil exploded. The fire blazed up momentarily and all twenty men looked around. David and his idea. It was a desperate chance but even that was better than nothing. Warily he circled until the barn blocked him from their view and ran quickly to its waiting shadow.

The door was half-open, and he slipped inside into the gloom. Light coming through chinks in the boards barred the interior with stripes of brightness. Searching through the piles of merchandise against the wall he found the cask he was looking for. It was a small one, and light.

Gunpowder was not very heavy. He learned that when he had helped Garth and Padgett blast new irrigation channels a few months before when the lower fields had begun to flood after the rains. He remembered everything about that day; the careful way his uncle had weighed out the big black grains, the paleness of the flame in the sunlight as it raced along the track of powder laid to the main charge, the sudden breathtaking concussion and the eruption of crumbled rock. He shook the cask cautiously. It was at least half full.

David eased the bung out and dribbled a thick trail of powder across the floor to the half-open door. Then he returned to the beginning of it, spilled another pile of powder over the end of the trail and laid the cask down with its opening conveniently close to the pile. If the men had reacted to the small explosion in the house, they should come running to this one. Then, perhaps, there would be an opportunity for some sort of action. He walked quickly to the door, but stopped. Matches. What was he going to light the thing with? Then he remembered the dagger at his belt. The barn was floored with stone flags. He took the knife and struck the point gingerly against the stone. There was a brief flare of blue sparks. Finding the trail of powder he repeated the action. Nothing. He tried again, desperately. The sparks flew among the powder. For a moment there was no reaction. Then the trail exploded in a puff of sulphurous smoke that sent him stumbling back, choking. Without waiting to see what happened he ran from the barn. He was on the edge of the ditch when the sudden roar of the explosion threw him to the ground. He rolled into the hollow and squirmed around to look at the reaction.

It was very satisfactory. The whole wall of the barn was blown out and the rest of the building sagged alarmingly. Hay from the loft was flung out in a huge dry cloud which caught fire before it even hit the ground. Soon the whole ruin was blazing. The men ran shouting towards the fire, most of them leaving their guns on the ground. He waited for the guard to move but the man only stepped forward a few yards to have a better view of the fire. But his back was to David and he was obviously not paying any attention. Moving as quickly as he could

David ran crouching along the ditch and emerged directly behind the hut. There was no challenge as he ran to it and used it as a shield to cover his approach. Then he was standing at the corner, looking at the broad back of the guard only a few feet away. Was he imagining some familiarity about the way those shoulders hunched? Examiners were secretly drawn from landowners in the neighbourhood, so the man might be somebody he had seen at some time. The men near the barn were milling about against the firelight, and none of them seemed to be looking in his direction. David took a deep breath and launched himself at the guard. His bludgeon hit him squarely at the base of the skull and the man went down without a sound. He dragged him back behind the hut. As he dumped the unconscious man in the shadows he paused and, out of curiosity, twitched off the black mask he wore.

The man was Lewis, Penn's assistant.

David stared at the slack face for a moment, trying to make some sense out of his presence here. He found it impossible. Replacing the mask, he went around to the door of the shed. There would be time later to work out where Penn fitted into the events of that day.

There was little light inside the small hut but he could see well enough to recognise Isaac and his wife standing at the end of it. Their wrists were bound. Samantha and Garth were bound hand and foot and had collapsed on a pile of grain spilled from the hoppers which lined the walls. The other children were not there.

It took a moment for them to recognise him. When they did, none of them said anything. David could feel their hatred quivering in the air. He took out his knife. Samantha was nearest and he bent to release her.

"Don't touch me," she snarled, squirming away from him. The grain flowed around her, half-burying her legs in its golden silkiness. "This is all your fault."

"But I'm releasing you," he said desperately. "You can escape."

"Escape from what?" Garth growled. "We're innocent."

"Do you think that will help you?" he said. He appealed to Padgett. "Uncle," he said. "Surely you see . . ."

"Get out of here," his uncle said. His voice was coldly

ferocious, like an animal's snarl. "You're the cause of all this. We don't need your help. As soon as we've given evidence, we'll be freed." His voice hardened even more. "Then you'd better watch out, boy."

David glanced desperately at the door. The men would not stay away much longer. He had, perhaps, another half minute. He made his decision quickly.

"Did the children get away?" he asked.

"One of the servants took them," Padgett said.

He turned to Samantha.

"Come with me, Samantha."

She ignored him, her eyes and teeth flashing in the light like those of a cat. Her face was cold and white with hatred.

With his left hand he grabbed the collar of her dress and dragged her bodily to her feet. With his right hand he hit her hard on the jaw. She lurched back, dazed.

"Leave her alone!" Garth shouted. He struggled to rise but the grain shifted beneath him and he tumbled back. David heaved the girl over his shoulder, backed through the door and out into the field. He didn't look towards where the barn was burning. If they had seen him he would be dead soon anyway. And if they hadn't, he must make use of every instant. Staggering under the weight of the body on his back he lurched to the ditch and half fell into it. Barely keeping his feet he crashed into the far side and tossed Samantha on to the edge of the road. He scrambled up beside her and picked her up again. The exertions of the day were beginning to tell. He was dizzy and his knees were weak. The men had tethered their horses on the road. He staggered towards them, praying that they were not hobbled. They weren't. Using the last reserves of his strength he threw Samantha over the neck of the first animal he came to and scrambled into the saddle. Grabbing the bridle of the next animal, he jabbed his heels into the one he was riding. It jerked forward, the spare animal following, while the others cantered off into the darkness, startled.

The road was clear and brightly lit as it ran along the edge of the home field. He would have go right through the light of the burning barn, past the place where the men were standing. They would probably shoot him, but

he didn't care. A sudden wild exultation was filling him. He had fought and perhaps killed two men that day. He had planned to trick them and succeeded in doing so. He had rescued the girl he loved. It would not matter if he died now. It would have been worth it. The cold night air made his eyes water as he urged the horses forward. His hair whipped about his head as they galloped towards the light. He dug in his heels again and shouted, forcing them on. The edge of the light raced towards him and he entered it like a thunderbolt, neither knowing or caring what would happen.

The men, dumbfounded, stood and watched him go.

Before they had time to mount, he was well down the road, and in the darkness they had no chance of finding him. At the top of the hill he turned off the road and struck out across country, urging the horse along copses and through the tiny wooded valleys that lay to the south of Padgett land. Samantha was still unconscious but showed signs of recovering, so he pulled her upright and sat her in front of him. She lolled sleepily against him, only half-realising where she was and making no effort to fight him. It was better that way. He wanted to think.

As the horses picked their way across the fields, David looked around. The land, silent and darkened, lost all its features, settling into a shadowed anonymity. Ridges touched with faint starlight stood out like wave crests, but the hollows were dark and threatening. It was like the sea, and he was adrift in it. Though he had nothing with which to help himself; no money, no friends, only the most meagre of weapons; he felt obscurely happy. Even the precarious freedom of a fugitive was better than no freedom at all.

nine

DAVID SQUATTED BY the stream and washed black earth from a bunch of carrots. The water was icy and numbed his fingers, making them feel to him like the red sticks of vegetable they held, stiff, crisp, likely if bent to snap in half. He took them out quickly and shook the water off. The drops sparkled in the morning sun. Massaging his fingers to bring back the circulation he walked up the slope to the tree under which they had spent the

night. His joints twinged at the memory of the hard ground and his spine cried out for a real bed, with blankets, but he knew it might be a long time before he had such luxury again.

Samantha was standing where he had left her, leaning against the tree. Her hands were flattened against the trunk as if she was bound to it, and she did not move when David came close to her. She had been that way since they had woken that morning. David had been irritated at first but now he hardly cared. Scorn is a weapon only if used against sensitive persons and David was finding, to his surprise, that he had very little sensitivity about him. He didn't really care what Samantha thought of him. He was concerned mainly with the problem of staying alive and out of the hands of the Examiners, the proctors and the other various forces who were chasing him. With this new-found confidence he could even notice with some satisfaction the blue and purple bruise on Samantha's jaw, an indelible reminder of the previous night's work.

"Does it hurt?" he asked, reaching out for her with his free hand.

She jerked her head away without looking at him. David thought about leaving her alone, then decided that he had to take a stand somewhere. He grabbed her by the throat and jerked her head around, tilting it roughly as if it were an object with no life of its own. She gasped as his hand cut off her breath but didn't struggle. David examined the bruise for a moment, then let her go.

"It won't kill you," he said. "Are you hungry?"

He held the bundle of carrots out to her. In the background, beyond where the tethered horses were munching contentedly at the rank grass, he could see the field from which they had been taken, and beyond that the house belonging to the tenant who farmed this plot. He had thought about asking there for food and shelter, but discarded the idea. These would not be familiar people, because last night they had ridden well beyond the Padgett and Stoker lands, but they might well have heard about a man and girl being chased by the Examiners. Even if they had not, they would remember them later, and David preferred to travel as secretly as possible. So he munched on his raw carrot and thought about better meals

of the past. Samantha ignored him and the carrots, though he could see from the way her tongue moved inside her mouth that she was hungry.

"You can't keep this up forever," he said eventually.

No reply.

"You're in this just as much as I am. It doesn't matter who's responsible. The fact is that you're here and you'd better make the most of it. The Examiners are looking for you as well as me. If they catch us, you know what will happen."

"It's all your fault."

Her answer was almost inaudible. David heard only a few of the hard hissed syllables and had to reconstruct the rest in his mind.

"It doesn't matter whose fault it is," he said. "The important thing is that we're in it and we have to survive somehow."

She turned on him suddenly, her face blind with rage. "Why didn't you leave me alone? If you hadn't . . ."

"Don't be ridiculous, Samantha," he interrupted. "There was an off-world fugitive using the farm as a hiding place. The proctors found out he was there, and they arranged for him to be killed and the witnesses disposed of. And your friend Penn was involved too. The guard on the shed was one of his men. Anyway, it doesn't matter one little bit that I happened to see Hemskir before he died. He would have died anyway, and the proctors would have arranged for the evidence to be removed just the same. The only difference is that both of us might have been killed too."

"We probably will be," she said bitterly, but with less anger.

"Probably," David admitted. "But we have a fair chance of surviving."

He glanced at the sun. It was well up.

"We'd better be moving," he said. Noticing her stiff movements, he made his first concession, a reward for her less angry mood.

"You ride the other horse. But don't try to run away."

David had no clear plan, but as they rode along the narrow farm tracks he tried to evolve one. He could expect nothing from the country around Padgett farm. It was

closed to him forever. There was his own country, the place where his father had held land, but that was hundreds of miles away and, without money, completely inaccessible. But in New Harbour, he had a chance of losing himself, of getting money, a boat perhaps. Also Penn was there, and he had some questions to ask him. They had only a thin chance of getting safely to New Harbour but it was a chance, the only one open to them He tried to estimate their position. New Harbour was almost due east from the Padgett farm. They were heading east now, but in the night they had travelled for miles in a direction David could only guess at. Best to make their way as far to the east as they could during the daylight hours and locate a road. That way, they might make New Harbour in a couple of days, perhaps three.

The country around them was clean and bare, unfenced grazing land, hilly, sometimes almost mountainous, but not unpleasant. Granite outcrops snouted above the soil as if the elbows of a rock giant were being forced from beneath the blanket of earth. The rock, weathered by wind and rain, patched by grey-green lichen, looked totally pure and natural, untouched and perhaps unseen by man. So used was David to the unmarked simplicity of the rock that he did not understand for a moment when in the afternoon they rode through a narrow pass between two hills and found a huge scar cut into a particularly exposed face of granite, the sharp edges betraying its human origin. He reined in his horse and studied it. The scar was weathered and weeds sprouted from the ledges.

"A quarry," Samantha said, wondering why they had stopped.

He nodded and looked around. A quarry. But who had cut it? There was no sign of any habitation. Only the sun and the wind.

Uneasily he urged the horse forward, past the quarry and out of the cleft between the hills. On the other side the ground fell away sharply to a small valley with a road running through it. The road too was weedy and overgrown. On the far side of the road they saw the building that had been constructed from the quarried stone.

It was a church.

David felt Samantha stiffen on the horse beside him.

"Come away, David," she said in a frightened whisper.

He touched her hand comfortingly. It surprised him to feel his own skin prickle with fear as he looked down on the tiny building, sinister and desolate in the sea of grass. It was only a building, he told himself, a thing of stone and mortar, built by men. The rationalisation helped, but not much. It took real courage to nudge the horse forward down the hill. Samantha did not move.

"I don't want to," she said.

Her childish fear irritated him, now that he had conquered his own.

"Churches shouldn't worry you," he said shortly. "You're supposed to be a Christian."

"That's different," she said. But that was all she said. There were no more arguments and she followed him down the hill.

As they came closer to the church David saw signs that it was not entirely abandoned. The road, though overgrown, had marks on it of recent traffic, and the grass around the building was worn down in parts, especially around the main door. A worn track led to something behind the church. David reined in by the entrance and peered through the doorless opening. It was dark inside and he could see nothing. Then he urged the horse forward, along the path and around the corner.

The path led to the churchyard, and he knew then why the church was still used. Old habits die hard. Even to a godless people, there is some special aura about a church. A particular quality is given to marriage, birth or death when it is hallowed by holiness, even a holiness that is not consciously respected. Though the people of this place no longer thought of the church as a place of god, they came here to bury their dead. Not in the old way, of course; that was outlawed. It had been fifty years since a new headstone had been set in this little cemetery and the graves lay overgrown and abandoned, their tablets blackened by weather and tumbled in the grass. But above them, on crude tripods of green saplings, some hardly weathered, the dead of this generation were offered to the sky. There were a dozen of them, each with a body cocooned in bandages wedged into its peak. Grey and rotting, the corpses sagged like bundles of discarded

clothes. The wind brushed past them, stirring the tattered wrappings and making the wood creak thinly.

David got off the horse and walked into the yard. Samantha sat upright in the saddle, her hands laid lightly on the pommel. After a moment her horse dropped its head and began cropping the grass. David felt as it did, unawed by the connotations of the place, even lulled by its peace. There was a sort of mystery here, but no menace. He felt at home, as if he had reached that place on the planet's surface on the precise point of rotation where there is no real movement and, while the whole world spins dizzily, one is standing completely still. This was a place to be buried, to sink into the soft dark earth and sleep forever. The ridiculous objects on their tripods had no place here, and their sagging seemed to reflect this. They too longed for the earth.

He wandered among the fallen stones, trying to read their inscriptions. Often they were worn into illegibility but occasionally he saw a few words still etched into the stone. "Mary Rutherford, wife of . . ." ". . . a Captain of the *Behemoth,* cruiser of the Line. Remembered with affection and admiration by family and crew." Under that one an emblem of crossed comets had been cut into the stone with such depth and precision that, even after this time, it was still legible. Done by a machine, David thought with a start. Machined things were so rare that they seemed magical now. He passed on, wondering at the peace of the place. It was not empty at all. The people who were buried here seemed to be all around him, friendly living presences. He could almost believe he was being watched. He glanced back. Samantha was still sitting on her horse. Turning again, his eye caught something lying on the ground a few yards away. He picked it up. It was a small pouch, stitched together clumsily from uncured hide. Inside were some weeds, flowers, scraps of bark and scrapings of some kind. He knew some of them. They were simples; herbs for magic.

The pouch was lying on top of the grass. It had not been weathered at all.

Somebody *was* watching him.

He walked quickly back to his horse and took up the rein.

string that David knew must be woven of human hair. The place was an odd and uneasy combination of scholar's study and hex-doctor's den.

Journeyman ladled out two bowls of thick soup from the pot and gave one to each of them along with a spoon. Samantha's was a worn metal one, apparently a prized piece from the proud way he handed it to her. David's was bone, roughly carved but functional. The soup was hot and savoury enough to outweigh the dubious quality of the meat in it and the strong flavouring of herbs. Both of them ate two bowls of it gratefully.

"You said you were a priest," David said. "I've seen the word in old books but surely there haven't been priests for years."

Journeyman seemed to hear only part of what David said. His vague eyes wandered restlessly along the walls, moving from charm to charm. Often they drifted back to Samantha.

"I've been priest here for seventeen years," he said quietly, as if David had never asked a question. "Ever since my father died."

David began to understand.

"And your father was priest here too?"

"And my grandfather."

David could imagine the office being handed on, the liturgy passed by word of mouth from father to son, getting more garbled over the years until it decayed into a sort of magic.

"It must be very lonely," he said.

"Sometimes," Journeyman replied vaguely. "People come. They still use the cemetery, you know, and they need advice occasionally. I pray with them."

David stood up and looked at Samantha.

"We'd better go," he said.

"Couldn't we stay a little longer?" she said appealingly.

"If we ride for the rest of the day, we should be able to find a farm that'll give us shelter."

She stood up wearily, though David felt she was not unhappy to be leaving the place. It had proved a better stopping place than most, but it was still a church.

"You're welcome to stay," Journeyman said. "I don't have many visitors here."

"We must leave, really," David said. "We must be in New Harbour soon."

Journeyman nodded vaguely. David wondered if he knew where the town was. Probably not. He could not have moved far from this place all his life.

The three of them walked up the steps into the dimly lit church and then out into the sunlight. They stood there, slightly embarrassed, like new friends saying goodbye. David felt absently in his pocket for a kerchief and pulled it out. Only at the last minute did he remember that the emblem he had taken from Hemskir's body was in that pocket also. He tried to stop his movement but it was too late. The tiny carving sprang from his pocket and tinkled on the stone flags.

Journeyman blinked and bent slowly to pick it up. For a moment he held it in his hand, staring blankly at the tiny piece.

"Very unusual," he said slowly. "From the islands of the sound. The Green island." He looked up. "Why did I say that? My father must have mentioned it."

David itched to snatch it away from him but he stopped himself. Better not to draw attention to it. Not that Journeyman would know what it was anyway. Though what had he said about green islands?

"It reminds me . . ." Journeyman began slowly. He stopped, groping about for some memory. Then he smiled.

"Ah, yes."

He held the insect close to his face on his flat hand, so close that it was only a few inches from his eyes. The bright light penetrated to the heart of the glass, lining every shaded veil in its mysterious heart, every transparent membrane in its intricate interior. Again its workmanship astonished David. How could it have been done?

Journeyman looked at the insect for a long time. Then he blew on it softly.

Lazily, the beetle touched its antennae together, flexed its wings and with a clatter rose gently into the air and flew away.

ten

DAVID'S FIRST THOUGHT was that he had been tricked, that Journeyman had somehow substituted a real insect for the false one. Was the man more intelligent than he seemed? But the moment he looked at the rapt expression on his face as he stared after the tiny beetle, David knew there must be some other explanation. Perhaps it had been his mistake. He felt in his pocket, hoping to find the hard jagged shape he had carried there for the last few days, but it was empty. He was forced to the belief that the tiny emblem had really spread its wings and flown away.

"What happened to it?" Samantha asked. "It was just a bit of glass, wasn't it? Not a real insect."

"I don't know," David said. "It looked like glass but . . ." He shook his head. "I don't know."

Journeyman was still staring upwards. The sun seemed to penetrate his watery blue eyes, washing into the inside of his head, lapping around the thoughts that stood there like slowly growing crystals. David took him by the shoulder and shook him. Painfully he came out of his daze.

"What happened?" David asked. "How did you do that?"

The little man looked around vaguely, as if not realising where he was. His hand was still cupped in front of him and he looked at it, hunting about the hollow for something lost.

"Gone," he said. "Flown away."

David tightened his grip on the man's shoulder. He was hurting him. He wanted to hurt him. He wanted to know.

"What did you do to it?" he hissed.

The pain had begun to penetrate Journeyman's daze. He flinched a little.

"I just blew on it," he said slowly. "I don't know why. I think I saw my father . . ."

He stopped, thinking, trying to remember.

"Yes, my father. He told me something about the green stone, once. It was a long time ago."

"But it was a glass carving, a *thing*!" David said. "It couldn't fly."

Journeyman nodded. "No," he said doubtfully. "You wouldn't think so. And yet . . . well, my father told me about the glass. It isn't glass exactly. He called it something else. Some foreign name. He hadn't ever seen any of it. It's very rare, very secret. Back before the war everybody seemed to think it was very important. But since then they haven't cared."

David thought of Journeyman's meagre library.

"Do you have any other pieces, or any books about it?"

"Books? Oh, no. No books. This was a secret thing, you know. Very secret. My father only told me because I was the last one. It was never written down. There are some things that the Lord keeps to Himself. For it is said that on the day of judgment shall the mysteries be revealed to you, the righteous shall be exalted and the poor . . ."

He began to mutter as the old words took hold of him and he wandered back into his dream world. Forgetting about David and Samantha, he walked to the little churchyard. They let him go. Their horses were still cropping grass. David helped Samantha into the saddle, then mounted his own horse, and they rode away from the little church. At the top of the hill he looked back but the old man was gone. There was only the little valley, the church and the wind.

From then on the ground began to slope more as the hills flattened to the sea. Occasionally they smelt on the breeze a hint of salt but they still had miles to ride before they would be able to see the ocean. They cantered down the winding lanes as if they had nothing to fear save being home late for supper and, though an occasional farmer looked up from his work to watch them go by, nobody challenged them. They may have cursed but they did not suspect. By dusk they had ridden for what to David seemed like a hundred miles, but the sea still lay somewhere ahead of them. Abandoning any hope of getting to a farm before nightfall David began looking for a likely place to spend the night.

"We'll have to stop soon," he said. "It's getting dark."

"Another night in the open, I suppose," Samantha said.

David looked around at the country. Aside from a few grass covered hummocks that marked the rusting remains

of abandoned farm machines or an old ruin, there was no sign that man had even touched this land.

"We don't have much choice," he said.

Samantha reined in her horse and stood up in the stirrups, looking around. David liked the look of her, tense and arched in the saddle. He was proud to be with her, if not as lover then as captor. She was selfish and cruel, but better than any other girl he had ever known. He didn't want a quiet woman, a moral or a beautiful one. He wanted Samantha.

"Is that a house down there?" she asked suddenly.

He followed her pointing arm. They were on the spine of a rise at the moment, and to the left the hill sloped down into a narrow valley choked with trees. In the centre somebody had built a low wooden cottage, merging it into the trees so that it was almost invisible.

"We shouldn't ask for shelter," David said. "They might remember us later."

"There isn't any smoke from the place," she said. "It looks empty."

David thought for a moment, then turned the horse off the road. It was a chance worth taking.

The house was empty, though there was a stout lock on the door. David looked up at the lowering grey of the sky and went looking for a branch strong enough to lever it off. Inside, it was gloomy and bare, but when a lamp was lit the place had a low-roofed cosiness that warmed them almost as much as the fire they lit in the stove. It was a cottage used mainly by hunters and herders, and correspondingly bare, but in a cupboard David found coarse-ground brown flour, salt, dried meat wrapped in oilcloth and a brick of pressed tea. Clumsily he set about converting these unattractive ingredients into some sort of meal.

Almost as soon as they sat down to eat on the floor in front of the stove it began to rain, and they listened with an almost childish pleasure as the downpour battered at the walls and roof while they sat inside huddled under blankets, warm and dry.

"I like the rain," David said.

Samantha didn't reply. *Angry again,* David thought,

they came through the trees, laughing at some private joke and flailing at sunbeams. For them, the freshness of the morning was an omen, and they responded to it with a demented gaiety. They raced their horses up the hill, leaped the fences that stood in their way and galloped down the road to New Harbour as if facing some special treat.

The mood faded quickly as they came down the last miles of the road towards the town. Like all settlements on Merryland, New Harbour was two towns, an old and a new. In the first years of colonisation, the towns had grown quickly. Teams of builders had been shipped in with plans already drawn up for cities large enough to accommodate more than a thousand times the original population of the area. Better to build houses first, to a set plan, than to tack on new suburbs later as they were required. The towns exploded outwards, flooding the surrounding country in plastic and wood, stone and metal, crusting the earth with habitations. When the work was done the crews went back to their ships and returned to Earth, leaving the ready-made cities in the hands of a few hundred families who would be caretakers until the houses were needed.

But on Merryland the plan had broken down. There had been a war and things had gone awry. The towns were only half occupied before war swept over the planet, snuffing out civilization as gas stifles a candle. The towns shrank in on themselves and the people drifted back to the old core, leaving the bright new houses abandoned, the streets empty. It was like that all over Merryland. The cities sat like ghosts, throbbing sickly at the heart but still dragging with them their own dead bodies, huge white corpses of plastic and wood that rotted in the wind and sun.

They came around a bend in the road and found the city waiting there for them. The transition was as sharp as that between a picture and the real world. One moment there were fields, the next suburbs. The road came so far then stopped abruptly, the edge sharp and clean as if severed by a knife. With mathematical precision the edge swept to either side of them in a shallow arc, shearing through fields and fences, a flood of houses sud-

denly halted and frozen. Warily they walked their horses up to it and looked down the wide empty streets.

"It's horrible," Samantha said. "Dead."

David dismounted and went to the side of the road. Kicking away the rank grass he heaved a post out of the ditch. It was a trefoil sign. He and Samantha exchanged a glance, then David tossed it back into the grass. Mounting again, he urged the horse forward into the town.

After the solid impact of the horses' hooves on the earth of the road, there was an eerie unreality about the crisp clop they made on these streets. There was a mechanical feel about it, as if their mounts had been changed under them into clockwork toys. Even the horses seemed to sense some evil about the place and snorted nervously. They rode carefully, always staying in the centre of the street, looking only occasionally at the empty houses with their bare and sterile gardens and blind windows. At every corner they found trefoil signs, and most of the houses had scrawled on them in black paint the inverted cross of the interdict. Nothing lived here. Even the birds stayed away, wheeling over it as they would over a desert.

Then they saw a man. They reined in quickly and watched him as he hacked a length of plastic from the fence on a house and dragged it back to his hand cart. When it was wedged firmly in place he picked up the cart and trundled it away down the road. Looking around, David saw that many of the houses had been mutilated. Some had lost fences, most of them had no window glass or metal fittings.

"We'd better leave the horses," he said, dismounting. "The real town must be just down there."

They left the horses tethered in a side street and walked cautiously in the direction the man had taken. The slight slope became steeper as they went on, and across rooftops they occasionally caught a glimpse of the sea glinting blue in the distance. A moment later, turning a corner they saw more people, a working party battering listlessly at a large two-storey house. They passed by without notice being taken. Luckily, clothing was much the same all over Merryland. Soon they began to find newly constructed buildings among the old, and huge areas where the houses had been cleared away. The new houses were

generally ramshackle and ill-constructed, made mostly from scraps of those old buildings demolished to make way for them. There was a futility about it that David found subtly amusing.

As the street steepened and became narrower, the town began to take on a new personality. This was almost wholly new construction, rough, awkward and cramped. He was used to this sort of town; the smells, the noise, the uncomfortable lack of style and coherence in everything he saw. The empty suburbs they had just left now seemed cheerful by comparison with this huge slum. He pulled Samantha closer to him and kept well away from the edge of the street with its foul gutters and naked squabbling children.

"Where are we going?" she asked. "Still the Christian headquarters?"

"I thought we decided."

"I don't know. I still don't understand Penn. He frightens me."

"I don't understand him either, but the only way we can get an explanation is to ask him. Anyway, we know too much about him for him to refuse."

"I suppose so."

The traffic was getting thicker now and the road was jammed with carts, most of them hand-drawn but occasionally relieved by a thin and rickety horse. There were few well-dressed people and fewer well-fed ones.

"Where is the temple?" David asked.

"On the waterfront. A big building. Penn described it to me once."

It took them half an hour to reach the waterfront. As they came closer to it the streets became more and more choked until it was almost impossible to move without forcing one's way, but eventually they emerged from the steeply sloping alleys on to a wide promenade that fringed the harbour. As they did, David saw for the first time New Harbour's own special graveyard.

When the Merrylanders had abandoned the old ways, everything had been discarded. Every machine, appliance, material and ideal of the old age had been destroyed as thoroughly as possible. In the case of ideals the destruction had been relatively easy, but the larger an object

was, the greater the difficulty of disposing of it. They had been unable to remove houses so they had merely barred them to visitors. The ships of New Harbour had posed a bigger problem and one which the reformers found insoluble. Ships were made to be unsinkable and almost indestructible. Faced with this, those in charge of destroying Merryland's small merchant fleet had merely piled the ships at one end of the harbour and left them there.

The breakwater seemed to have been constructed specially to curve a protective arm around the graveyard of ships. Inside its curve they had lain shielded from the worst storms, attacked only by the slower erosion of wind, rain and sun. There were all kinds, from merchants to dinghies, jumbled together in the same grave. Nobody had ever counted them but there must have been hundreds, jutting out of the water in a thousand places over an area of acres. The sun had turned green the glass and tarnished the metal fittings but it would be centuries before the acid of time was able to rot the indestructible plastic of the hulls. In a way they symbolised Merryland. The outside was gone but the interior remained the same.

The Christian temple had a good view of the wrecks. The three-storied building stood well above the rest on the quay, and from its roof one could see right across the town. Nothing advertised that this was the headquarters of the sect but the lack of some sign, in contrast to the gaudy advertising of the other buildings in the town, was enough to make the place strikingly conspicuous. David could imagine the graft the Christians paid to keep such a large establishment in so central a location. Leaving Samantha behind on the other side of the street, he swiftly reconnoitred the building, hoping for some sign that Penn was inside. He found it soon enough. In the alley beside the temple a cart was being loaded with provisions. It was just such a cart that Penn must have taken to Padgett farm. He returned to the street and told Samantha.

"How do we get in?" she asked, glancing at the man who stood guard just inside. As they watched, a woman shuffled up to the door, said something to the man and was admitted.

"It's probably the same password they use at meetings. Dominus Vobiscum. If it isn't, we can make up some excuse."

No excuse was necessary. The guard, bored and half-asleep, hardly noticed them as they went past. Inside, a small entrance foyer led off into a large hall. David had an impression of candlelight and soft movements in the darkness but his interest was in the less public rooms upstairs. Avoiding the main hall they went along a side corridor until a flight of steps took them up to the second floor. At the top, David took one look along the corridor and dragged Samantha into a side ante-room. They watched breathlessly as two short black-clad men went by. Proctors.

There were two more doors in the corridor. The first was locked. The second gave when David pushed it. Looking around once more, he took a deep breath and pushed it open.

"Come in," Penn said from behind his desk, "and shut the door, please. There's a draught."

eleven

PENN PUT DOWN the paper he was reading and looked at the two fugitives. He didn't seem very upset by their sudden appearance, almost as if he had expected them. He still wore the same glasses, David saw, though in the dimmer light of the room their effect was eerie rather than ridiculous. His eyes seemed to shift suddenly behind them so that it was impossible to meet his gaze. For the first time David realised that the man wore these glasses for reasons other than those connected with his vision. The room fitted in with Penn's indefinite image. There was a desk, chairs, a map of Merryland, and nothing more.

"David . . . Bonython, isn't it?"

David nodded.

"And Samantha. I'm very sorry about your parents."

Samantha's hand tightened on David's.

"Are they dead?"

Penn glanced at her in surprise.

"Surely you knew?"

He was not disturbed at the thought that he might have shocked her, only with the, to him, more important suggestion that his calculations might have been wrong.

"She knew," David said. "We guessed, anyway."

"You murdered them," Samantha said quietly to Penn. She was very pale and calm.

Penn wasn't upset. He shook his head.

"There are various kinds of killing," he said. "The law agrees that killing to save one's own life is perfectly acceptable. So, while I agree that I'm responsible for the death of your family, I wouldn't call it murder."

"Your man Lewis was there. You organised the whole thing."

"Yes. I sent him across country to raise the Examiners as soon as you left us that morning. I had to hurry. When I knew that the Earth proctors were aware of civilization on Merryland, I had to prove immediately to the proctors here that I was their ally, otherwise when the Earth force arrived I would be caught between the two groups. The Examiners' methods are also notable for conveniently removing all evidence and witnesses. In theory, everything indicating that Hemskir had been here, even to the information he gave you, should have been removed by them."

"But we escaped."

"Yes, you escaped," Penn agreed. "But I guessed you would head for me here, so you were never really out of my sight. The proctors would never have let you get here if I hadn't kept it a secret that you were still alive."

"I thought the proctors were on your side," David said.

"The situation is more complex than you can imagine."

He glanced at the two of them and made a decision.

"I shouldn't tell you, but perhaps it might be better if you knew exactly what's happening here. Sit down."

He settled back in his chair. David and Samantha found two straight-backed chairs and moved them closer to the desk. The room was dim and very quiet.

"You probably know as much as I do about the history of this planet over the last two generations," Penn said. "The anti-religious reaction to the wars, the general regression, the persecution of almost every minority that might have caused any trouble to the administration, the

rise of the Examiners. But perhaps you haven't been aware of the Christian underground and the general reaction against the persecution that's been going on for the last twenty years."

"The first I heard of it was when Samantha told me about the meetings," David said. "Before that I'd always thought the Christians were some sort of religious sect."

"And so they were," Penn said. "When the persecutions began, the Christians went underground, along with most of the other religions. The others died off fairly quickly but the Christians have been at this sort of thing before, back on Earth. They adapted well. In fact they worked up such an effective underground that it soon became more of a pressure group than a church. When you think of that, it isn't so odd. The whole structure of a church is rather like that of an army. It took a few years, of course, but after a time the religious trappings almost disappeared and the Christians became one of the leading power groups on Merryland, only slightly less influential than the administration itself."

So the Christian church was not a church after all. David felt obscurely disappointed.

"But you still use the robes. And why the services?"

Penn smiled. "I'll come to that," he said. "You amuse me, Bonython. I could almost think you wish we were some kind of persecuted religious minority."

David didn't reply.

"The robes," Penn went on, "and the rites like the one you attended out at the farm . . ."

He glanced at Samantha.

"Excuse me, but he did ask. The rites and so on were primarily intended for use in blackmail. The whole business was recorded, sound and vision, for possible use later on."

David felt himself blushing. Samantha was calmer. He wondered if she cared, and decided that she didn't. He admired her for it.

"If you had attended a little longer," Penn said to Samantha, "you would have been approached and asked certain favours. If you had refused . . ."

"What sort of favours?" Samantha asked.

"Oh, various things. For instance, we might have asked

you if you had noticed any suspicious visitors to the neighbourhood; men who might have come from the matter transmitter hidden in your house. We could tell from our instruments that there was one in the area but only a spy could tell us whether anybody had used it."

"What about the proctors?" David asked impatiently. "You still haven't explained why you didn't tell them about us."

"The proctors," Penn said slowly. "Yes. Well, I must say that in their case we come out of things in a bad light. About ten years ago we had developed to a point beyond which it was impossible to go without revealing ourselves publicly. Of course our activities were an open secret to the administration but that doesn't count for much outside the cities as you probably know. Revolution was considered, but we knew that we didn't have the power or the skill to take over or control the society. We needed help. And the only place we could obtain help was from . . . outside."

"From Earth?" David asked.

"Not exactly. The politics of the universe are in as much of a mess as ours at the moment. Each planet has as much power as it can snatch for itself. Even the proctors, who are supposed to have unlimited power for the whole galaxy, don't actually control more than a small area. And inside the proctor corps there are all sorts of tensions and schisms. The group that we contacted was a fairly small one operating in this general area, though it had never actually contacted Merryland or any of the other worlds around here. I've been to Earth and I knew how the proctors could be contacted. It took a long time to convince them that they should help us, but we eventually did it. With their help we've managed to have the proctor cordon around this area maintained, and all contact cut off. They've also given us equipment and instruction."

"But you said . . ." David began.

"That I was hiding things from them? Yes. Let me finish. In the beginning we were quite amicable allies. It seemed that we were getting much more than we were giving, and the proctors were happy to let this arrangement continue. If we had been more suspicious we would

have realised that we were being led on. It wasn't until a few years ago that we discovered the proctors had been making their own secret survey of Merryland, looking for a certain material of which they had found signs here."

"The green stone," David said.

Penn blinked at his direct statement.

"The green stone," he agreed. "They didn't know much. All they had were a few hints, but enough to make them look for more."

" What is the stone exactly?" David asked. Better to let Penn reveal himself before telling what he knew.

"I don't know. Once, a long time ago, I was given a clue. I went to Earth to follow it up. I killed people for more information. Then I came back here. I still know little more than when I left Earth, but slowly I'm narrowing down the range of possibilities. It came from a research station somewhere on Merryland, but where . . . we can never find out except by checking every possible site. That's difficult with the proctors watching everything we do."

David wondered if he should tell Penn about the insect and what happened at the old church, but he decided to say nothing. Penn could not know that he had had the stone Hemskir had brought with him. He would think the proctors had taken it when they killed the fugitive. David glanced at Samantha and knew from her eyes that she would say nothing.

"What will happen now?" David asked. "The Earth proctors know about Merryland, and they must suspect something about the stone."

Penn nodded. "Yes. They'll be here as soon as they can raise a force. There aren't any matter transmitters so they will have to come by ship, but that don't delay them very long. When they arrive Merryland will blow wide open. Unless, of course, we find the green stone before they arrive. The person who has that stone controls everything."

The calm way in which Penn discussed his intrigue angered David. For the last few days he and Samantha had been pieces in a game, shunted from square to square at the mercy of the players. It was time for this to stop, for him to assert himself.

"And what will happen to us now?" he asked.

"Well, you can stay here for the moment, until the

proctors have been put off the scent a little more, and then perhaps we can think the whole problem out."

"Let's think it out now," David said. "We're valuable to the proctors, you said. So we must be valuable to you too, otherwise we wouldn't be here like this. It's important for you to keep the secret of the green stone out of the hands of the proctors, but your reasons aren't logical ones. You're frightened of it, and you're frightened of what the proctors will do when they eventually find it. If our lives depend on things like this, they aren't very secure. No, we want to get away from New Harbour as soon as we can. I'd rather be hunted over the hills than stay here locked up by you."

Penn tented his fingers, an odd magisterial gesture that made him seem like a judge deciding their fate.

"You can't leave," he said.

David stood up and tried the door. It was locked, as he thought. There was no simple knob, but a series of catches that held it in place. Only Penn could let them out.

"Unlock this," he ordered, knowing that Penn would not.

"You'll be much safer here," Penn said.

David leaned back against the door. The hard bulge of his knife jabbed into his spine. Penn did not know he was armed. He would not be prepared for any attack. Deliberately he walked around the desk. Penn watched him coming without alarm. Perhaps he thought David would punch him. His hands rose from the desk and moved with practised ease to ward off any blow, but he was not prepared for the knife. David pulled it out quickly and with one movement penetrated Penn's defence, holding the point to his unprotected throat. Penn's hands gripped David's sleeve, then relaxed as the point pushed deeper into his flesh.

"Unlock it," David said again.

Penn rose from his chair. Grabbing his arm David twisted it behind him and, holding the blade horizontally across the man's throat, guided him towards the door. Penn fumbled with the catch then the door swung open.

Samantha looked into the corridor.

"Nobody there," she said. Then she looked at Penn.

"What are you going to do with him?" she asked.

David hadn't thought of it. Without saying anything else. Samantha went to the desk and returned with a heavy rod of ebony that Penn used as a ruler. Their eyes met for a moment, then she hit him hard behind the ear. He gasped and went limp in David's arms. He dumped him to the floor and looked out into the corridor once more. It was still empty. As a last thought David ripped the map of Merryland from the wall. Leaving the unconscious man on the floor, they slipped out and closed the door behind them. With luck, they would be well away from the place when he woke up.

It was not as hard as they expected to get out of the building, though David had one nervous moment when the map, hastily stuffed under his jacket, began to unfold. The place seemed empty, deserted of people. Moving as quickly as they dared along the narrow corridors they headed for the rear of the building. The stairs were narrow and their feet rattled on the bricks, but nobody heard them. At the bottom of the steps there was a narrow door. David opened it a crack and looked out. The bright light of the sun and the smell of the sea hit him. They slipped into the narrow lane at the side of the building. At the foot of the street they could see the ocean and hear it lapping at the stones of the quay. The loaded cart was still there, unattended.

"What are we going to do now?" Samantha asked.

David pulled the cover back from the cart and began dragging out the contents.

"Find the food," he directed. "Take as much as you can carry. Weapons too, if there are any. And heavy clothing."

As he sorted through the bundles his mind was busy working out a plan. It should work, if they were quick enough, and if it did, the stone and its secret would be theirs.

twelve

AS THEY WALKED together towards the end of the breakwater, the buildings became shabbier and smaller until there were only a few small warehouses, empty and weathered. The few people on the street took no notice of the boy and girl with the hastily tied packs on their

backs, and those that did took them for labourers indentured to some merchant. After a while, even those who looked were gone and the breakwater was deserted. It seemed to stretch away for miles, a curve of narrow cobbled street torn from its context and dropped into the ocean.

Soon the abandoned ships began to appear in the water on the sheltered side of the mole. These were mostly small boats, their bottoms stoved in and their engines rotting in the slime beside them, hardly more than bundles of rust after decades in the water. They were of no use to David. He knew what he wanted, and he knew it would be up in the pile of ships ahead if it was to be found at all.

"Where are you going?" Samantha asked urgently. "This is a dead end. We can't even hide up here."

"Don't worry," he said. "I know what I'm doing." He was too busy looking around him to explain.

They were among the bigger ships now. Their masts reared up around him like trunks in a submerged forest. The water flowed greenly around their flooded decks, stirring the weeds that drifted like hair in the current. In this huge charnel house of ships, it was impossible to pick out individual vessels from the hundreds jumbled in together. Occasionally there was a glint of metal and plastic among the wrecks but always some blemish marred its completeness. Hulls had been cracked like skulls, metal had rotted and rusted, wood had dissolved into corruption. He walked on, anxious now as the end of the breakwater came into sight. All around the masts were thicker than trees in a forest and the wind thrummed through them with a mournful note.

At last, almost at the end of the road, he found a boat that seemed whole. It had been discarded carelessly, tossed over the edge of the mole among the other wrecks and left there. He could imagine the party bringing it out here on some cold night, shivering in the icy wind, flinging the load with a muttered curse among the others, then hurrying back to town for a mug of hot wine. For years the little boat had lain among the others, stirred by the current but otherwise untouched. It was a narrow plastic runabout, the sort that surveyors had used on short coastal trips back in pre-war days. David had seen pictures of them in old books and re-

membered the trim lines and the description of their capabilities. It was the thing he needed.

He glanced out to sea through the shoals of wrecked ships. The boats here were larger fishing vessels, wooden mainly and therefore well rotted by now. Most of them had fallen away to nothing but ribs and keel-metals, letting the sea come in to submerge their naked skeletons. It would not be hard to get through those.

"We're taking this boat," he told Samantha. "Keep watch for anybody coming along."

She stepped back and leaned against the balustrade, watching both him and the narrow road leading back to town. She seemed scared, but did what he told her to do. Perhaps then David realised for the first time how much she had changed in the last few days. Cautiously he lowered himself over the edge of the stone barrier and down on to the rough rock foundation of the mole. From there he could clamber down to the little boat lying half capsized against the slimy boulders. He righted it clumsily, bracing himself against the timbers of another boat to keep his balance, and had the satisfaction of seeing his movement empty out most of the water that had filled it.

"Samantha."

Her head appeared over the balustrade, hair hanging forward to shade her face as she looked down.

"Nobody coming," she said reassuringly.

"Do you think you could get down here without falling?"

She gauged the distance with her eye.

"Yes."

"Then throw down the bundles and try it."

It was done more easily than David had expected. With an easy movement she squirmed over the parapet and came down without a slip. He noticed with some envy that she did it with more agility than he had.

"We'll have to push it out beyond the wrecks, but after that we should be all right."

Samantha looked at him, puzzled. "But where can we go in a boat? They'll be expecting us all down the coast. Besides, we haven't got any oars."

David braced himself against the rib of the boat nearest and pushed. The little boat moved easily from under him and he almost fell into the water. He was more careful the

next time. Samantha waited for him to answer her question but when he didn't she turned herself to steering the boat from her side. Together they guided it out of the graveyard to the edge of the open sea. It stretched before them, vacant and hostile. Both felt awed by its vastness.

Samantha sat down on the floor of the boat and pulled her legs up under her.

"I'm not doing any more until you tell me where we're going."

David checked the sun and pointed directly south, across the open sea.

"That way," he said. "I'll explain in a minute. Trust me."

They paddled steadily out to sea, until the breakwater and the graveyard of wrecks ceased to be real things and merged into the generalised blur of shapes that makes up a landscape. During the whole time there was no reaction from the town. If they had been seen, nobody had thought to pursue them. David didn't expect them to. The ordinary people didn't care about anything outside of their daily existences. It would take the proctors to sting them into action, and the proctors were otherwise occupied.

When they could paddle no more David stopped and let the boat ride on the gentle swell. They were already away from the shelter of the mole and the waves had a controlled ferocity about them that was frightening. The sea contemptuously permitted them to sail on it, but it would take only a slightly more vicious flick, a wave only a few feet higher than these, to throw the little craft on to its back. This was the opening of a battle between them and the ocean, a battle that David was determined to win.

The map he had taken from Penn's office seemed huge in the narrow boat. David spread it out as best he could and tried to chart a course. The city of New Harbour was clearly marked. It had been a capital of sorts once. Lines led to and from it, apparently indicating trade routes, telegraph cables and such. None of these would be any good to him now.

"Will you tell me now where we're going?" Samantha demanded. She looked around the narrow boat. "It had better not be far."

Studying the map David found the main currents and followed their wide swing across the edges of the main con-

tinents. One of them swept almost up to New Harbour, then curved away to the south, breaking up into eddies and whirlpools against the hundreds of islands in the main archipeligo.

"Down this," he said, following the line of the current with his finger, "to these". His finger lost itself among the islands. "Remember what Journeyman said? 'A green island'. And Penn mentioned an experimental station. There's a Green Island here, and it's marked as a restricted zone. Only government installations got that sort of treatment."

Samantha was incredulous. "But that's miles!"

"Only about three hundred."

"But we haven't any oars. And what about shelter?"

David squatted down on the floor of the boat and looked under the narrow seats. Nothing. But in the prow of the boat he saw a small cabinet wedged tightly into the body. He wrestled with its catch, fumbling with the alien mechanism until with a sudden squeal it fell open. There was a puff of dry musty air and a pile of objects tumbled out between his feet.

"This is the emergency kit," he explained. "Back in the old days all ships used to carry them. That's mainly why I picked this boat. It still had the kit intact. Everything we need should be here."

He sorted through the things anxiously, fumbling with each item until he understood what it was. There were no clues. All were made of clear plastic, without markings. It was assumed that any normal person would be thoroughly familiar with each item and its uses. David had to puzzle them out painfully.

"This must be the sail," he said, fumbling at the folded sheet of tissue-thin plastic in a transparent envelope.

Samantha pointed to the fastening holes around the edge and the matching clips on the side of the boat.

"Or a shelter," she said.

"Both, probably," David said. After ten minutes work with the billowing sheet they finally clipped it into place. Magically, as soon as the sheet was clipped down it froze into inflexible hardness, covering the whole boat with a domed cover stiff enough to repel almost any attack. Only partly erected the half-dome made a handy sail. As well as

the sheet, there was a conversion still for water, a shallow box lined with metal wire which they concluded was a sort of stove, lines and electronic lures for catching fish, masks for underwater swimming and a few other items neither could make any sense of. The things they could understand would be enough for the time being.

While they searched among the things in the locker, the boat had been wallowing in the wave troughs, rising and falling in a regular but disconcerting rhythm. The off-shore breeze had kept the waves low and the boat almost stationary but now, with the day waning and the afternoon cooling the air, the sea had begun to heave more suddenly, and the waves were frothed with white. Clumsily they hoisted the sail and paddled the little boat around so that the wind could fill it. At first the motion was imperceptible but soon it increased, and they huddled under the sail dome for protection as the prow butted into the waves and spray exploded over them.

It became dark and the waves rose higher until it was not spray that spattered on the dome but solid green water. Battling the surge and heave of the boat they clipped the rest of the cover into place and had the comfort of watching it balloon and freeze. It turned the waves easily, but its thinness gave them protection from the water only. The fury of the sea still towered all around, threatening to crush them. Soon waves were washing completely over them, submerging the fragile pod in dark green water, then flinging it high on to the crest of a wave so that the whole tumbled landscape of the sea was visible for a moment before the boat sank again. David and Samantha huddled together, trying not to look at the rage that surrounded them. Finally, through some miraculous trick of the human metabolism, they managed to sleep.

"Wake up!"

David blinked the grains of sleep from his eyes and tried to turn over on to his back. It was painful. Every joint seemed locked into immobility. He struggled around and looked for Samantha whose voice had woken him. Squinting against the sun he saw her sitting on the rail of the boat, dangling her feet in the water, looking over her

shoulder at him and laughing. She was fresh and clean as if the sea had just cast her up. He tried to smile.

"How long have you been awake?"

She kicked at the water with her bare feet and a shower of drops sparkled in the sun.

"Oh, hours."

Hours? David glanced at the sun, barely over the horizon, and guessed her "hours" was more like ten minutes. He dragged himself into a squatting position and began to peel off his outer clothes. He felt no embarrassment, nor did she. They were outcasts, making their own rules. Spreading his clothes over the rail to dry, he lay down in the sun and, resting his chin on his hand, looked out over the water.

"Calm, isn't it?" Samantha said. "You would hardly know it was the same sea."

The storm had swept the ocean of every feature as a wind sweeps clean a desert. The sea breathed in slow oily expansions on which the little boat moved easily, quivering occasionally with some deep vibration. David watched for minutes, then the problems of keeping alive intruded themselves. On a hunch, he spat into the water beside the boat. Slowly but perceptibly the tiny smear of spittle drifted behind them. He checked the sun, steady to their left. They were going south. The storm had carried them into the main current he had been searching for.

"We're in the current," he said to Samantha.

She kicked some more water.

"This is all quite crazy, you know," she said. "Wandering off in a little boat, looking for some mythical treasure or whatever it is. I hardly believe it's happening."

"Sometimes I don't believe it either. Wouldn't it be funny if it was all a dream?"

"Funny, but unlikely," she said. "I'm hungry—that isn't imaginary."

David took fruit from the bundle they had stolen from Penn's cart and threw one of the fish lures overboard. A minute later he had a bite. It was a small fish, but thick and meaty. He threw the line in again, and a moment later another fish lay flopping in the bottom of the boat. These were rich waters. Nobody had fished them for decades, and the creatures living there had no suspicion of

humans. After a little preparatory experiment they found out how to operate the stove and the fish cooked in a moment. From then on fishing became their favourite pastime. One of them was always throwing a line overboard, fishing just for the pleasure of seeing the slow fluid shape of the fish floating up towards the lure out of the deep green water. At the last moment they would withdraw the line, watch the fish, disappointed, wriggle back into the depths, then go looking for another one.

Love and the water turned them into beautiful animals, and they drowsed through the long hot days, hardly speaking or moving until night came, and the stars. The sea never again became stormy and they floated on it without movement, content to be carried wherever it wished to take them. Naked and brown, they were at once the pure essence of humankind and an extension of it, their physical appearance remaining the same, though purified and perfected, while their minds drifted into new lands of thought and dream. Sometimes David would turn over and search the bright sky for a sign of life, but there was none. He knew, intellectually, that the proctors must be looking for them, and that they would know, in general, that they had gone to sea. Perhaps they even knew they were going towards the islands. But the sea was huge and their boat small and transparent. They were probably safe, for the moment. Then he would turn over and go back to his dream.

But one day he felt Samantha's hand on his arm, laid there urgently, the fingers digging into his flesh. He looked up and saw, as she had seen, the blur of land on the horizon. It took them all day to drift near enough to make out the first of the islands, but each yard nearer seemed to abrade away another layer of their ease and complacency. They climbed back into their clothes, began cleaning up the boat, looking anxiously upwards to the sky that, although still clear, seemed suddenly menacing, like a clean bright eye that might at any moment lose its interest in the world and focus instead on them alone.

David took out the map and began to make his calculations. Green Island was one of the first islands in the group, and its contour corresponded with that of the island on the horizon. He steered for it, hoping that the current

would not veer off too suddenly but would hold strong enough for them to use the rudder to escape from it. It took them a day to reach the island. It was low, but the outline was broken by curious rugged structures standing up jagged against the sky. It was too far away for them to see clearly, but David knew they were buildings. As they drifted into the area of the island the current slowed, dropping them off into one of the slow eddies that edged it. Paddling steadily they drifted into the bay.

The buildings were not visible from the water but there were signs all around that this had once been a busy anchorage. Docks, a landing strip drifted over with sand, piers. And below, on the floor of the bay, David saw something else that, although almost invisible, was curiously familiar. Taking a diving mask from the emergency chest he fitted it on to his face. Quietly he dropped into the water and sank towards the white sand. On its surface, a carpet marked only by the patterns of current and sea creatures, lay a sign that he had been right. Thirty feet long, untouched and still, in its way, alive, a whale of green glass waited for release from its enchantment.

thirteen

THE BEACH WAS a crescent of blinding white sand shelving almost imperceptibly into the clear green water. Once it had been disciplined, smoothed and shaped, edged with docks, esplanades and roads, but the sand had covered those in the first few years of disuse. In a few places there were still signs of the old installations, but most of them had been submerged in the fine white sand. Only an occasional corner of weathered concrete jutting from a dune proclaimed man's passing mastery of the small island.

David and Samantha paddled the boat through the shallows and beached it. After weeks at sea, the feel of solid land under their feet was disconcerting. They stumbled for a while until the old ways of walking came back to them. Then, moving clumsily and with exaggerated care through the hot sand, they walked up to the deserted promenades and the buildings that fringed the beach. David tried to make out details but the sun blazed back

from their bleached walls, almost blinding him and making the whole landscape shimmer.

Above the scooped hollow that held the beach the ground levelled off. The sand here had been swept away in places, while in others the wind had piled it in drifts or let it flow like dry glaciers over the edge of the promenade. As they came up to the wide street that separated the buildings from the beach they saw that the sand had penetrated even into the lower floors, choking the doors with drifts and debris. There was no way into the buildings, but neither of them wanted to go in. Looking up they could see the ranks of blind windows, each offering entrance but not invitation.

There were gaps between the buildings. Once they had been lanes and streets, but the sand had clogged them long ago. Samantha walked to the first of them and looked down towards the interior of the island.

"Look, David," she said quickly.

At the end of the street, there were more buildings, but not like those on the beachfront. David had never seen anything like them before. Fighting through the loose sand, he scrambled finally to the end of the street and looked down on the main town.

It was like a huge surreal forest of immense steel trees and glass fruit. Metal columns, thick and strong but looking frail for the load they carried, soared hundreds of feet into the air. Curving out from them, delicate branches carried oval dwellings, eggs of plastic, glass and steel, tinted every imaginable colour. On every tree there were a hundred houses and there were hundreds of trees in the town. The ground below them was strewn with shattered light tinted and torn by the crazed glass above. Among the sand drifts, sometimes almost covered by the dunes, fallen houses lay like crushed skulls. Eventually they would all fall as the wind and the rain eroded their delicate balance, but for the moment they hung delicately suspended, held up only by their own impalpability, as if the wind did not care to tear them down but was content to flow through and around them.

David looked upwards to where the topmost houses lost themselves in the blaze of the sky. His eyes swam as the sun burned into the retina, but he ignored the black dot

that appeared suddenly on the rim of the sun, and it soon became lost among the swirls of colour and blots of darkness.

From two miles up the archipelago was like a set of jagged teeth curving in a savage grin from horizon to horizon. The sky above the islands, thickened into visibility by the mist from the land, suggested a domed skull, while the white of the sandy bottom stood in for bleached bone. The teeth of the skull were well-spaced, some sharp and whole, bedded deep in the frame of the range, while others, old volcanoes, had rotted into dark pits fringed with white. Above one of these atolls the proctor ship was poised.

"Steady it," Elton Penn ordered as the ship rocked in the warm updraughts.

The pilot cursed inwardly and adjusted his verniers. The little four-man bubble quivered, then froze in mid-air as the anti-gravity grabbed more space, put out extra anchors. When the trim was regained, he searched among the islands and recentred the cross-hairs of his sight on the atoll.

"Are they there yet?" the third man asked. He was older, robed like a Merrylander but uncomfortable in the clothes.

"I can see something moving down there," the pilot said, squinting through the sight. "It must be them."

"We could catch them now," the passenger said.

"I wouldn't suggest it," Penn said. "We don't know what we're looking for."

"I thought that was why we followed them," the passenger said. "What are you hiding?"

"Nothing," Penn said quickly. "Don't you trust me yet?"

"No."

"I've guided you here, haven't I? Didn't I put you on to these two, suggest following them, have them shadowed all the way here?"

"Yes. I'm wondering why."

The pilot stretched the magnification to its limits but the image he saw, foreshortened by the extreme range and distorted by the miles of shimmering air through which it was viewed told him nothing. He could see the tree town and somewhere at the base of the trunks shadows moved, sliding grotesquely on the white sand.

"There's plenty of time," Penn said. "I think we might as well wait."

"Come back, David."

Ignoring Samantha's warning David slogged through the last few feet of sand to the base of the nearest tree. He had a sense of the houses hanging over him, but no fear. They seemed too light to have any real weight. As he came to the base of the pylon one puzzle was solved for him. The stem was hollow. Once elevators must have moved up the tube, servicing the houses. The elevator was probably stuck somewhere high above him. He walked into the tube, floored down with sand, and looked up. The sides were welted with cables and pipes, like capillaries and serving the same purpose, providing life for the houses.

"David?"

He looked out.

"I'm all right."

She stood well out in the clearing, watching him nervously.

"I don't like this place."

"It's only a town."

He looked at the walls of the stem.

"Only metal."

He banged it experimentally. The steel was thin and boomed faintly. He hit it again, harder. The echo rang. Samantha looked up suddenly, and screamed.

There was a grinding sound from above.

"Get back," David shouted.

She scurried out of the clearing as the house, dislodged by David's blows, fell from the topmost levels of the trees. It seemed at first to drift down, but that was an illusion. As it fell it brushed another branch and the metal limb sheared off instantly, flinging its load out into space. The houses fell ever faster with a quiet that was more terrifying than any noise. With a suddenness that shocked them both they crashed into the clearing, shattering on impact into complete ruin. Dust spurted from them like juice from a crushed fruit. For minutes the whole town rang with the echoes. Then, slowly, they died. Nervously David and

Samantha picked their way through the debris towards the fallen globes.

"Something seems to have happened," the pilot said. "It looks like . . ."

He peered closer. "Some kind of collapse. If I was nearer . . ."

Penn made a decision.

"We might as well go in now," he said. "Call in the others. Tell them to wait for our report." He smiled. "It'll be quite a surprise for our young friends down there."

Samantha picked up a bundle and worried it with her fingers. It crumbled under her touch, the cloth falling into brittle strands and dust.

"You'd think it would have been better preserved in this climate."

David poked at the rest of the debris.

"Everything rots," he said. Not only clothing and furniture, but societies too. Nothing lasted. But as each thing died, another should come to take its place. Nothing had yet appeared to replace the old society which had built these houses. Perhaps nothing ever would come. It might all rust away, and the sand would take over completely.

"Where do we go now?" Samantha asked. "There doesn't seem to be anything here."

David looked around. "The buildings out on the beachfront are offices of some kind," he said. "If there was any sort of research station . . ." He looked up at the hills behind the tree town, the ragged lip of the submerged volcano. ". . . it should be up there."

"What are you looking for?"

"I don't know exactly. Something to do with the green stone. I think it was invented or made here. I'm sure this was their experimental station."

"But you still don't know what it is."

"I have a good idea. Remember the way the insect flew away when the old priest willed it to? And you know what the earth machines are like; no knobs or dials, just blocks that you touch to turn on. I think the insect and the whale were machines too. Maybe they were made from the stone; maybe they were living things turned into stone. I don't know. I think the reason the insect came to life was that

the stone is sensitive to thought. It does whatever you will it to do."

"That's impossible," Samantha said quickly.

"I know it's hard to believe," David said. "I know how you feel. I feel the same way. I don't want to believe it. But that's what I think. What other answer can there be? The earthmen can make machines that work when you touch them. Why not a machine that works when you touch it with your mind?" He looked up towards the hills. "Are you coming?"

"You know I am," Samantha said. "We've come this far. Perhaps I'm getting as starry-eyed as you."

David smiled. Starry-eyed. He thought of himself as the only sane person on Merryland, but Samantha could be right. He might be nothing but a dreamer without the sense to stop at dreaming. Then he put the thought out of his mind and started slogging through the sand drifts.

He was so engrossed in the physical problem of fighting through the sand that it was not for a moment that the new sound intruded itself on his consciousness. Samantha heard it first, and stopped, looking around. Then David heard, and glanced upwards. Neither of them believed for a moment that the black dot dropping towards them was what it appeared to be, a ship, obviously produced by earth science. Then the high-pitched whine of its motor punctured their disbelief. David grabbed Samantha by the arm and half-dragged her forward.

"Up in the hills. We can hide there."

Samantha's eyes were wide.

"How did they know we were here?"

"They must have followed us. I should have thought of it."

The ship levelled off above the tips of the house trees and moved over the town. Except for the whine of the ship and the clatter of their running steps there was no sound. The edge of the town came abruptly. One moment they were among the trunks, the next they stood on the edge of a cleared area, almost half a mile across. David had been right about shelter in the hills. The slopes were thickly wooded and offered plenty of hiding places, but between them and the hills was an insurmountable barrier. The open space had been a park once, probably closely clipped

lawn with a few trees, but it had become overgrown long ago. The grass was more than a yard high in places, like green wheat. They could not run through it or hide in it.

"What now?" Samantha gasped.

David looked back. Through the tops of the trees he could see the ship circling slowly over the town. It was possible that they hadn't been seen as they ran from the clearing, so they might be lucky enough to get well out of the town before they were seen. They might even get right across the park and into the trees without being overtaken.

"Do you think you could run across there?" he asked.

"I could try," Samantha said. "But they'll see us."

"We can chance it." He took a deep breath. "Now."

They sprinted out into the grass. But before they had gone a few yards David looked over his shoulder and knew their attempt had failed. The ship was not circling any more. With a quick turn it broke its regular curving motion and darted towards them. David slowed his pace, then stopped. Samantha stopped too. They knew it was useless to run. The ship would catch them easily.

Penn leaned over to see past the pilot.

"They've stopped," he said.

The pilot clicked the safety catch off the ship's fire-control switch.

"Now?"

"No. I want to question them first."

The pilot leaned over to put the catch on again. The ship lurched slightly as he did so, and a mild updraft from the open field, driven in across the town, accentuated the movement. Quickly he reached to correct it, but the cabin was crowded and his hands did not have enough space to move the stick.

"Get back, please," he said urgently. "I . . ."

A dark shape loomed up to his left. He banked feverishly to avoid it.

"Look out!" Penn shouted. It was too late. The jagged tip of a house tree reached out and casually pierced the bubble of the ship. With one stroke it tore the side out of the craft. For a moment it lingered on the spike, then tumbled off, crashing to the ground with a dozen dislodged houses.

David and Samantha watched the miracle open-mouthed. They did not move until the roar of the collapsing houses had echoed away and died in the sunlit morning.

"Should we go and see if they're dead?" Samantha asked.

David shook his head. "Come on," he said. The collision had a godlike inevitability about it. He had been saved yet again. He did not know yet for what, only that he must keep going in order to find out.

On the edge of the forest they found a road. It was overgrown, like all the others on the island, but it was wide enough and strongly enough built to have stood up well. David followed its track with his eye up the hill. At the top there were more buildings, low and businesslike.

"That must be it, up the top there." He glanced at Samantha's face. She was pale. "Do you want to wait here?"

"Yes," she said. "But I'm coming with you anyway."

The road was steep but David hurried forward. At the top a gate barred their way but the wire was rusted almost to nothing. Dragging a stick from the undergrowth at the side of the road he knocked a hole in the fence and wriggled through. Samantha was just behind him.

He threw the stick aside and looked around. There were five low buildings made of grey stone. They had no windows. The doors were metal and he would not have had a chance of breaking in, even after such a long period of disuse and decay, unless one of the doors had not been unlocked. Cautiously he heaved it open. He had expected a laboratory; machines, retorts, plans and maps, but the place was empty. There was only one room, a huge low chamber lit by a ceiling that let in the diffused light of the sun. The floor was black, and it was only when he bent and looked at it closely that he saw the intricate web of fine lines etched into it. This was the machine, this pattern of geometrical symbols and formulae. Like the matter transmitter it had no moving parts, only the engine of atoms that would never run down, need fuel or wear out.

He went back out into the sun and looked around.

"What was in there?" Samantha asked.

"Only the machines. See for yourself."

She looked in.

"They might have destroyed everything before they left."

from the tangled wreckage he propped himself up against the crushed wreck and methodically doctored his broken leg and gashed body. Then, purposefully, he dragged himself upright and hobbled among the trunks, following the tracks in the drifted sand. The landscape shifted dazzlingly through his distorting eyeglasses as he lurched among the ruins.

fourteen

DAVID SWAM TO the edge of the lake and crawled out panting. Behind him the water sparkled in the sun. It gurgled at his feet, licking at the ground which was already beginning to dissolve under its touch. Carefully he held the image of the water in his mind, balancing it like a brimming bowl until he could decide what to do.

He heard a sound above him but didn't look up. He knew it was Samantha.

"Don't make a noise," he warned. "I have to concentrate. If I stop willing it to be water, it'll revert again."

"Well, let it."

"I can't. My clothes are soaked. Help me to get them off."

Feeling rather foolish David let Samantha pull the sodden clothes from his body. When they were lying on the ground he let the sun dry him. Only then did he relax his hold on the water. In his mind he imagined the bowl tipping, pouring the water out on to the ground. The effect was instantaneous. From a shifting sheet of water the lake suddenly became a solid once more. It shimmered briefly, then it was again as it had been when they first saw it, a deep mirror of green glass, harder than steel.

"What's that?" Samantha asked.

There was a pattering on the lake, the sound of tiny stones falling on to the surface.

"It's probably the water that evaporated," David said. "When it changed back it became stone again."

He brushed his hand through his hair and a shower of tiny droplets flew from it, landing on the lake with the same ringing sound.

Samantha picked up his jacket. It was stiff, like armour. She laughed.

"You wouldn't be very comfortable in this."

"Are any of them dry?"

She sorted through the discarded garments. The jacket was useless but the leather trousers had absorbed very little moisture and were still wearable. He struggled into them, cursing the fine dust of green stone that clung to the hide, making the surface as abrasive as sandpaper. When they were laced up he brushed the outside thoroughly, trying to gouge the tiny motes from their homes in the pores of the leather. He had a reason for doing this. There was a decision to make, and he was trying to avoid it. But Samantha knew what he was thinking.

"What will we do now?" she asked.

David straightened up and looked at the lake.

"I don't know. This thing ; it's . . ." There was no word. This was the secret of life, the ultimate power, the material from which the universe was made.

"It doesn't really change anything," Samantha said. "We're still outlaws."

"But with this, we have power to control everything," David said. "That's the terrible thing. We could kill everybody on the planet, everybody in the universe if we wanted to."

He stopped. On the lip of the hollow above them there was a movement. He looked up and saw Penn swaying on the edge. Instinctively he reached for his knife, but it was in his clothing, welded into his belt. He grabbed Samantha and pulled her behind him. They waited.

Penn didn't look at them after the first glance. His eyes went to the lake of stone and lingered on it. It was easy to imagine what thoughts were going through his mind. Here was power more sweeping than any the mightiest emperor had ever possessed, and it belonged to him. Or at least it would when he had disposed of his two rivals. That problem could safely be left until later.

He moved to step down, forgetting his wounded leg. As he dug the heel into the loose dirt below the ruined road it buckled under him. Quickly he jerked the other leg forward to steady himself, but it slithered in the soft dirt. Half falling, half sliding he tumbled down the bank and skidded out on to the lake. Clods of dirt followed him, marring the bright surface with their dissolution. The quiet mood of the place was shattered. Struggling to rise among

the dirt he had scattered, Penn seemed to represent all the things David hated, the greed, the search for power that defiled everything it touched. Yet, for all this, he admired the way Penn fought against his weakness. His leg was encased in a plastic sheath that moulded the blood-stained cloth against the bruised and swollen flesh. David thought of Hemskir, now almost forgotten. Both men had been caught in the power machine. The first had been destroyed by it, and David knew that Penn would also die in it eventually.

Even though Penn had drugged himself he was hardly able to stand. Only his spirit kept him going, dragging his wounded body about like a burden. Finally, he stood, facing David.

"I'm not that easily killed," he said, his voice slurred. "Not easily."

He reached to his belt and took out the gun sheathed there, but he did not level it. His strength seemed to come only in spurts. It was necessary to build up fresh reserves before he could raise the gun and shoot them. He looked down at the green lake.

"Did you find out what this is?" he asked.

"You know what it is," David said.

Penn shook his head, an exaggerated movement, like that of a drunken man.

"No. No, I don't know. I can guess. I've seen it work."

He stopped, remembering.

"Once I saw a whole island blown up with just one little piece of it. That's when I started looking."

"You have it all now," Samantha said.

David tightened his grip on her arm.

"Quiet," he whispered urgently.

She shook off his grip.

"No. He's going to kill us anyway."

"Kill." Penn looked at the gun in his hand and memory returned. The gun rose shakily to point at them. "You understand," he said. "I must."

David looked at the tiny black hole in the end of the gun. Oddly, he felt no fear. He did not really believe it yet. Then he looked down at the lake. Penn was reflected completely in it, a detailed image that had been rock-steady but which now shimmered vaguely beneath the surface.

The rest of the stone was also troubled. The clear green was shot through with shadows, dark patches that shifted at the edge of his vision, always evading his direct gaze. Ominous patches.

Penn sensed something also, and looked down. David and Samantha backed away, scrambling up the steep slope away from the lake that had suddenly become an object of fear.

"It's responding," David said hoarsely. "He must have keyed it with his thoughts."

Thoughts of death.

The green was almost gone now. Welling up from the deepest recesses of the lake a cloud of black was billowing towards the surface like an eruption from the quiescent depths of the volcano. As it struck the surface, David expected it to boil, billow and seethe, but it remained flat and calm. Penn looked down at the blackness, knowing now what was to happen. But, even knowing, he did not move. Perhaps this was the thing he had been looking for always; the power to give death to others was only a step towards the fulfilment of his own wish for oblivion. The lake was still dark but in it were more shadows, white now, and horribly specific. David looked for a moment, then turned away. The shadows were rising, white wraiths flying towards their victim. He pulled Samantha after him up the slope.

"Don't look," he said.

There was no sound from Penn except at the very end. Lying with his face pressed to the ground, David heard only one cry, a single choking cough, not repeated. When he turned slowly to look, there was nothing on the lake. The black surface reflected only clouds, a clean mirror image. As he watched, the black began to fade until green reasserted itself and the lake was back to normal.

Samantha was pale, and David too felt sick and dizzy. He helped her to the top of the slope.

"Let me sit down," she said breathlessly.

He left her there to rest and, on impulse, turned back to the lake. It was completely green now, smooth and unmarred, a clean slate on which he could write anything he liked.

Anything he liked.

The suggestion formed in his mind so secretly that he hardly noticed it until he was already putting it into execution. Once begun, he could not stop, did not want to stop. Breathlessly he watched the stone, scanning it for the movement that he knew must come. Then, very near to him, just a few feet from the edge of the hollow, the stone moved, shifting slightly so that the surface caught the sun in a new way, breaking the pattern of clean reflection that covered the rest. At first the flaw was geometrical, a neat arrangement of edges and surfaces jutting through the floor, but then it rounded, smoothing down into a familiar shape. Colours ran in it, fading momentarily, then brightening. Reds and whites flowed and froze by turns. Nearing completion the movement of the colours quickened, the swelling became opaque, then began to move and separate. David could do nothing more than watch as the man he had made rose slowly to his feet and looked around. His eyes—grey eyes, not green—settled on David. His look was slow and without fear.

"You made me?" he asked.

David nodded.

"Why?"

"I wanted to know . . ."

"To know what?"

"If it could be done."

"A man can do anything."

"Even make other men?"

"Why not? Creation and destruction are easy, compared with maintenance and improvement."

He looked at David again.

"You're worried about this?"

"Yes."

"Because the making of a man should be the work of a God?"

"Yes."

The man smiled. It was like the sun rising. There was brightness and fire in that smile. The secret original sin of mankind was revealed by its light.

"You can make a god if you like."

David looked at the lake and the man, knowing what he had to do.

"You're going to kill me," the man said.

"I must."

"No!"

He moved quickly, but David was prepared. The image was clear in his mind of the deep chimneys of the volcano that would take the stone and hold it forever. He ordered it, and the hollow began to drain at once, flowing quicker than water, as quick as mercury into the depths of the earth. The man struggled but the whirlpool of green took him and bore him down until he was lost far below in the welted curve of the funnel. There was one sound, a huge and ugly gurgle as the earth sucked up the last of the stuff, then there was nothing.

They met the first men two weeks later, miles out to sea. They were fishermen in a frail wooden boat, searching far from the coast for a larger catch. They looked with terror on the couple in the glass boat, naked and brown like two spirits. Their hands went to their nets and spears, tightening around the crude implements.

"Who are you?" one asked nervously.

"Humans," David said.

"From Merryland?"

As if it mattered. Very soon the proctors would control everything, trying to take over this planet as they had taken over the others. Then Merryland would cease to exist. The power game would take it, making it into just another square on the chess board. David did not want that. People could be great if they were allowed to live out their lives, to search for things in their own way. A religion would not give it to them. They must find the greatness in themselves. David had gone to the furthest point of his potential and discovered that greatness. He had been God for a moment. He did not like it. He wanted to be a human being, and he wanted everybody else to be human too. He could start now.

The fishing lures were on the floor of the boat. He picked one up.

"Paddle nearer."

Samantha poled the boat closer until it nudged the other. David stepped into it. He took the man's fishing spear and laid it down on the floor of the boat.

"Don't use this," he said. "There are better ways."

ROBERT CHEETHAM

THE FAILURE OF ANDREW MESSITER

TRANSITION FROM SLEEP *to wakefulness. Transition? Had there been transition? Darkness, total and complete. Listen! No sound outside. Inside? Listen for roar of emptiness in the ear, the beating of the heart in the veins of the neck. Nothing. Feel Objects against the body—near the body. Clothing, surfaces—anything. Nothing. Memory. Try memory. One—two—three—four—five, up to five, loudly in the ear, in the brain. Needle in the arm plainly seen, plainly felt. Then, nothing. Now, nothing. Asleep? No, transition took place. When? A second? An hour? A year? Wakefulness is sight, sound, touch, taste. Nothing. Why? Memory. A needle—no. A trolley in a cavern? Box? Corridor! White room, white faces, white gowns. Before that. Memory. Memory! Scream! Nothing.*

Miss Lardner watched the throbbing stylus of the cardiograph and recorded its progress on a card.

"He's awake now, Dr. Maine. The effects of the pentathol have worn off."

Maine angled his lean body toward his assistant. "Good, how's he reacting?"

Miss Lardner turned to study the encephalograph, her smooth forehead creasing with tiny frown lines. "Confused, I think," she said. "The graph's reacting strongly."

"Give him a little time. The effects of the anaesthetic are bound to throw him for a couple of minutes. He'll settle down soon now."

To belie his words, the arm of the encephalograph jigged alarmingly and a sharp-pointed pattern of peaks and valleys raced across the paper.

"He's upset about something," said Miss Lardner unnecessarily.

"He's probably just remembered. It's enough to upset

anyone. Give him time. He'll come to terms with the situation and get to work. Don't worry."

Memory.

"The five cardinal senses we possess fulfil every basic need we have. Anyway, as far as we're aware of our needs. They allow us independence of movement, decision and appreciation. We've become satisfied with the limited powers they afford and tend to regard anything outside their range as abnormal."

Dr. Messiter paused and sipped his gin and tonic while Maine waited patiently for him to continue.

"We hobble through life, crippled spiritually, mentally and physically because we're too cosy to recognise our own dormant potential."

"You mean the paranormal sensitivities. . . ."

"Paranormal, be damned!" roared Messiter, slamming the arm of his chair. "Paranormal, abnormal, supernormal, extranormal! Everything implying they aren't normal. You're a doctor of medicine. You're fully aware that the human brain contains vast areas which are simply not being used. They bloody well *should* be used. They should be *normally* functional.

"The university has a comprehensive faculty for parapsychological study," protested Maine, "and it's generally admitted in the profession. . . ."

"They're going about it in the wrong way," interrupted Messiter again. "They're attempting to develop faculties over and above the existing senses. It's like trying to tell a man he's short-sighted when he can see quite well enough to suit himself."

"There's been a fair measure of success."

Messiter snorted. "Success! After years of experimentation a particularly gifted telekinetic can move a pingpong ball two inches, when he ought to be capable of hurling planetary masses through space. I don't call that progress."

"There's no way of hastening it. The unused cerebral lobes are atrophied to a degree. It could be damaging to push too much on them too soon."

Messiter gulped the drink and lumbered to his feet. He went to the cocktail cabinet to refill his glass, pausing on the way to collect Maine's.

"That's not the reason. We haven't the slightest idea

how much forcing those areas will take. I'm convinced they could stand a damn sight more. No, the fault lies in our methods. We're taking the longest way round."

"What other methods are there?"

"There's one. It's so simple we've never had the intelligence to recognise it." Messiter handed Maine his replenished drink and returned to the chair. "We're too happy with what we've got," he continued. "We hear, see, feel, smell and taste, and we think we've got everything. We're not prepared to go any further. Now, deprive your subject of these faculties. . . ."

"It's been done," said Maine. "Subjects have been placed in conditions of physical suspension, deprived of all their senses for long periods. The result was mental vacuity, that's all."

Messiter waved impatiently. "Long periods aren't enough. The subject is both consciously and subconsciously aware that suspension must come to an end—that there will come a time when he's going to regain his faculties. A short period of activity gives way to boredom, and boredom results in vacuity. He just doesn't really care enough."

"So, what's the alternative?"

"Total deprivation. Total and permanent."

"How?"

"Surgery, of course. Detach the optic nerves, block off the nerve centres of the body, leave nothing functioning except the involuntary mechanisms of heart, respiratory and digestion. Do this with the full knowledge and awareness of the subject, then leave him to get on with it. If he knows he will never see, hear, feel, taste or smell again in his life, his brain will be goaded into self-preservatory action. The atrophied areas will open up and he'll become sentient once more through a completely new set of faculties."

Maine stared at the older man, the ice melting in his untouched drink. "Good God!" he said.

"Damn it! I'm speaking as a scientist, not a humanitarian."

Maine pulled himself together. "All right. Your man is there, totally immobilised. He develops these new talents. How does he communicate with the rest of us poor mortals? How does he tell us what's happened?"

"Through the medium of his powers, of course. Telepathy, telekinesis—any one of a number of so-called parapsychic abilities."

Maine relaxed and smiled his disbelief. "Wonderful theory, doctor, and who's to say it won't work. You've one big problem, however. Who's going to agree to become a total physical cripple in the interests of parapsychological research?"

"Me," said Messiter.

Miss Lardner checked her watch and wrote the time on the card.

"The pattern's settling down," she said. "He's fully conscious and there are fewer indications of emotional stress."

"Heart?"

"Normal."

Maine nodded. "That's a good sign. I'd say no matter how well prepared one is in advance, it must be one hell of a shock to wake up and find you're going to be nothing but a useless slab of meat for the rest of your life."

"It was Dr. Messiter's own idea."

"That doesn't alter reality, Miss Lardner. It must be awfully lonely to be all by yourself in your own skull."

Floating, submerged deep in Nothing. Feel. Try to feel Something. Reach out in the blackness and—no hands. Make hands. Think! Think of hands. Five fingers, palms, nails, whirling grooves at the tips, texture. A hand to touch, feel. Nothing. No light. Make light—make light—make light. . . .

Miss Lardner made a slight adjustment to the feeding tube strapped to the inside of Messiter's elbow. Absorption rate normal, respiration normal, heartbeat normal. A certain amount of cerebral activity. Messiter was definitely conscious. It was slightly eerie to watch the inert, useless body, knowing it imprisoned a bright mind looking for a way to escape. She hoped it would succeed. It never ceased to amaze her that a man like Dr. Messiter, with his undoubted ability and standing, could risk his very life in such drastic experimentation. She shared Maine's scepticism about its success, but the feeling was tinged with more than a little admiration. It must be wonderful to have enough faith to destroy one's very physical existence in order to

chase a nebulous dream. A dream of tremendous proportion, it was true, but still only a dream.

She turned as Maine entered the room.

"How is he?" he asked.

"Everything normal. He slept for about three hours, but he's awake now. I've marked it on the card."

Maine hung his jacket up behind the door and put on a white lab coat. "You'd better knock off now, Miss Lardner, and get some rest. I'll take over for a spell."

For a moment he and Miss Lardner gazed down at the still, waxen face of the paralysed man.

"I wonder what he's thinking about," said Maine.

Calmer now. Must be calmer. Organized thought. Disorganized thought leads to panic, panic leads to insanity. I am Andrew Messiter. Good. Complete, grammatical sentences. Think in complete sentences. I am Andrew Messiter. I cannot see, hear, feel, taste, nor smell. I am alive and able to think. Mind is—my mind is sane and functioning well. I have no physical senses and never will have again. Therefore I must learn to develop others so that I can communicate. Communication. That must come first. Maine and Miss Lardner are near. Reach out. Reach out for them. . . .

Maine smiled at Miss Lardner across the littered table in the café. He reflected how unaware he had been in the past of her youth and good looks. Maine was a normal man, he supposed, who liked women and had his share of amours. Somehow this girl had escaped his notice as a woman. She was a scientist, yes. An excellent assistant, yes. That she was also a very pretty girl was just beginning to dawn on him.

"How long have we been working together with Messiter now?" he asked.

Miss Lardner thought for a moment, and Maine discovered that attractive little lines creased her forehead when she did.

"It'll be six months day after tomorrow," she said.

"You know, we've spent our days and most nights constantly in each other's company, and I don't even know your first name."

The girl looked faintly startled, then blushed. It was another revelation for Maine.

"Wendy."

"Well, look, I've a suggestion. Let's drop the Dr. Maine —Miss Lardner relationship. It's getting a little dated. I'm Bill and you're Wendy from now on. Okay?"

Miss Lardner lowered her gaze shyly. "Okay," she said.

Mind's eye. It's true, the mind has eyes. Eyes of its own. It's a matter of learning how to use them. Now look. Watch. Send out tendrils, feelers, groping the dark, looking for contact. Hairline filaments of infinite sensitivity, stretching, coursing, trying to find something to touch. I see them quite plainly here in my mind, as if they were physical things. They were always there, rolled up tightly, intertwined. Learn to unwind them carefully, like untangling a badly snarled fishing line. Sort each from the other, one at a time, and let them float free. They were always meant to be that way, the eyes, ears, tongues and nerve ends of the mind. Send them out—probing, feeling. . . .

Maine stared blearily across the laboratory at where Miss Lardner checked the softly humming machines. There were heavy lines of tiredness about his eyes.

"Hell!" he said thickly. "I feel bushed."

"Go on," answered the girl without turning. "You're getting more sleep than ever these days."

Maine heaved to his feet and crossed to a white enamel wash basin where he drank two cups of cold water.

"That's probably the trouble. I'm getting too much sleep. Damn it, there's nothing else to do. Day after day, week after week, respiration normal, temperature a constant 98.3 subnormal, cerebral activity regular—it's driving me up the wall!

"We've got to be patient."

"Patient! A pox on your platitudes! Eight months—eight months we've sat in this icy mausoleum watching a living corpse, waiting for something to happen. He doesn't communicate. He doesn't even die or go insane. What the hell *is* happening? Wendy, I don't know how long I can carry on like this. I've other things I want to do."

Miss Lardner turned from her files and gazed at him with serious eyes. "Bill, we've got to give him a chance. A real chance. Dr. Messiter gambled his life on the success of this project; the least we can do is give it a little time.

Everything indicates he's conscious and mentally aware much of the time. That's a good sign, at least."

"How do we know he hasn't gone into some kind of coma?"

"His whole metabolism would change. You know that. Besides, the encephalograph reacts as if he were using his brain logically."

Maine folded his arms and leaned against the wall, his body at a petulant angle. "And he might go on using his brain logically for the rest of his life—the rest of our lives. We're young, Wendy, with everything ahead of us. I'd like to take you out to dinner, to a show. I want to take you for long drives in the car and make love to you in romantic places; but I can't. One or both of us has to stay here all the time watching that—Thing!"

He jerked himself away from the wall and stamped over to a window. "The hell with it, Wendy, I'm bored!"

Behind him, Miss Lardner let her fingers rest lightly on the sleeve of his white coat. "We've got to be patient," she said softly.

I can see the filaments quite plainly now. I visualize them as long, incredibly slender fibres of purest white, radiating from a central nucleus. The centre is small, very small once it has been freed from the woven mass of threads. That centre is me—my locality. The filaments are also me, searching, probing for contact—contact! Roundness! A round, pulsing glow that signifies life. I can feel it! I can see it! A tightly rolled crisscross of threads like a thick ball of twine—as I used to be. Probe—probe—explore—seek an end somewhere—somehow! Dr. Maine! Dr. Maine, can you hear me?

"Dr. Maine, can you hear me?"

Maine's voice crackled metallically from the earpiece of the telephone. "Clear as a bell. What's the 'Dr. Maine' bit?"

Miss Lardner giggled. "Sorry, darling. Momentary reversion. Just slipped out, I guess."

"What's the panic?"

"The brain pattern is registering strongly and the heartbeat's stepped up. There's something happening and I thought I'd better let you know."

"What do you think it is?"

"I don't know. Looks like excitement, or effort of some kind."

"Anything else? Voices coming out of the air or tables floating around the lab?" Maine's tone was faintly sarcastic.

"Of course not."

There was pause, then: "Wendy dearest, I love everything about you, and especially the sound of your voice, but do you have to wake me at four in the morning to tell me the Thing is having nightmares?"

"Bill, I told you, you shouldn't talk about him like that."

Maine's sigh was gusty over the telephone. "All right, I won't argue now. I'm too damn sleepy. Call me if anything really startling happens—but only if. Otherwise I'll be in at the usual time. Good night again, darling."

Miss Lardner replaced the telephone in its cradle and turned to watch the encephalographic recorder. The stylus leapt strongly under the influence of some cerebral activity. On the table in the centre of the room, a quickened pulse throbbed on the side of Messiter's neck, giving the only visible sign that his body still lived.

The ends are tucked away like the loose threads on a hastily knitted sweater. Man has always had this power, the power that would enable him to meet the universe on equal terms, but he has kept it ravelled and useless in his skull since the beginning of time. I must contact them—tell them. I have to get into this tight, closed mind. Probe it, prod it, caress it until I find a hidden nerve end and—Now! Brilliance! Aching light on eyes that have always been blind. Where—what? The laboratory! Material objects, walls, machines, faces, figures! Miss Lardner and Dr. Maine. A body. A still, white, dead body lying on a table. Me. Voices talking—no. Thoughts—no. I must learn to distinguish voices from thoughts. Voices are thoughts. Whose thoughts? Miss Lardner! Miss Lardner is the mind I am touching. I see through her eyes. Maine standing close, his face serious, his eyes intent and—something. . . .

"I tell you, it's been too long already. If Messiter could speak I'm sure he'd agree. Like this, he's as good as dead."

There was an odd lightness in Miss Lardner's head—almost a sense of excitement, of discovery. She was vaguely

together without that Thing between us. I want to get married and have children and work, without spending the remainder of my life as a morgue attendant."

The pressure of Maine's hard fingers enabled Miss Lardner to fight the rising tide of panic in her. She felt strength and love flow into her from the man who held her. Her own heart and mind reached out for Maine and she lost contact with everything except him. Her rigid muscles relaxed and she became calm once more. There was nothing for her beside him and her love for him.

"Of course, Bill," was all she said.

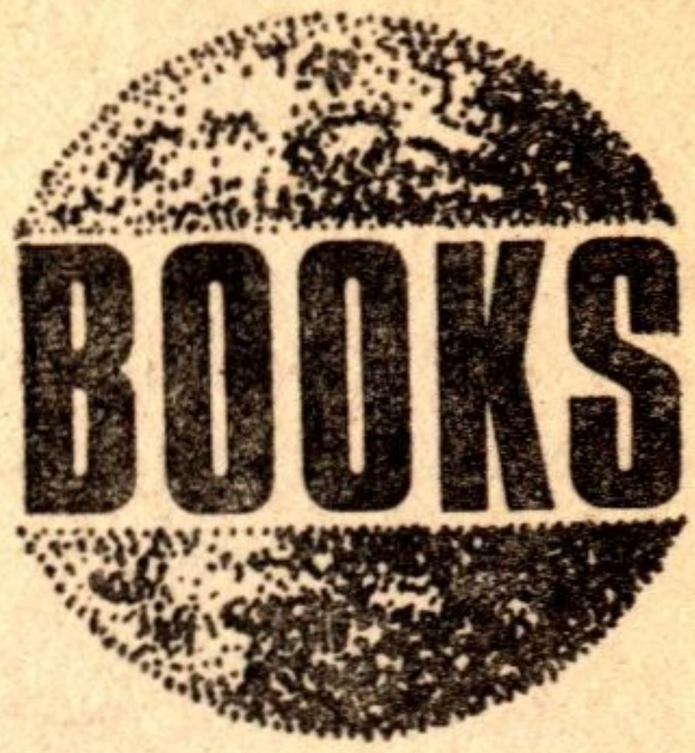
Swiftly, Maine moved to the centre of the room and lifted the top of the container holding the formula that dripped constantly into Messiter's veins to feed him. Into it he poured the contents of the phial and replaced the cap.

"That'll do it. The toxin has the effect of slowing down the heart action and eventually stopping it. It'll take about half an hour."

Slowly, together, the young man and woman walked hand in hand from the room that had been their prison for so long. Not once in their last few minutes there did they glance at the recording machines, with their black inky styluses, dancing their frantic, leaping jig of terror.

J. G. BALLARD

THE COMING OF THE UNCONSCIOUS



SURREALISM, by Patrick Waldberg (Thames & Hudson, 18s.) THE HISTORY OF SURREALIST PAINTING, by Marcel Jean (Weidenfeld & Nicholson, 4 gns.)

THE IMAGES OF surrealism are the iconography of inner space. Popularly regarded as a lurid manifestation of fantastic art concerned with states of dream and hallucination, surrealism is in fact the first movement, in the words of Odilon Redon, to place "the logic of the visible at the service of the invisible." This calculated submission of the impulses and fantasies of our inner lives to the rigours of time and space, to the formal inquisition of the sciences, psychoanalysis pre-eminent among them, produces a heightened or alternate reality beyond and above those familiar to either our sight or our senses. What uniquely characterises this fusion of the outer world of reality and the inner world of the psyche (which I have termed "inner space") is its redemptive and therapeutic power. To move through these landscapes is a journey of return to one's innermost being.

The pervasiveness of surrealism is proof enough of its success. The landscapes of the soul, the juxtaposition of the bizarre and familiar, and all the techniques of violent impact have become part of the stock-in-trade of publicity and the cinema, not to mention science fiction. If anything, surrealism has been hoist with the petard of its own undisputed mastery of self-advertisement. The real achievements of Ernst, Tanguy and Magritte have only just begun to emerge through the mêlée of megaphones and manifestos. Even in the case of a single painter, such as Salvador Dali, the exhibitionistic antics which the Press have always

regarded as "news" have consistently obscured the far more important implications of his work.

These contradictory elements reflect the dual origins of surrealism—on the one hand in Dada, a post-World War I movement not merely against war and society, but against art and literature as well, out to perpetrate any enormity that would attract attention to its mission—the total destruction of so-called "civilised" values. The rise of Hitler, a madman beyond the wildest dreams even of the Dadaists, shut them up for good, although the influence of Dada can still be seen in "happenings," in the obscene tableau-sculptures of Keinholz and in the critical dictats of Andre Breton, the pope of surrealism, that "surrealism is pure psychic automatism." Far from it.

The other, and far older, source of surrealism is in the symbolists and expressionists of the 19th century, and in those whom Marcel Jean calls "sages of dual civilisation" —Sade, Lautréamont, Jarry and Apollinaire, synthesist poets well aware of the role of the sciences and the industrial societies in which they lived. Sade's erotic fantasies were matched by an acute scientific interest in the psychology and physiology of the human being. Lautréamont's "Song of Maldoror," almost the basic dream-text of surrealism, uses scientific images: "beautiful as the fleshy wattle, conical in shape, furrowed by deep transverse lines, which rises up at the base of the turkey's upper beak—beautiful as the chance meeting on an operating table of a sewing machine and an umbrella." Apollinaire's erotic-scientific poetry is full of aircraft and the symbols of industrial society, while Jarry, in "The Passion considered as an Uphill Bicycle Race," unites science, sport and Christianity in the happiest vein of anti-clerical humour.

This preoccupation with the analytic function of the sciences as a means of codifying and fractionating the inner experience of the senses is seen in the use surrealism made of discoveries in optics and photography—for example, in the physiologist E. J. Marey's Chronograms, multiple-exposure photographs in which the dimension of time is perceptible, *the moving figure of a man represented as a series of dune-like lumps.* Its interest in the peculiar time-values of oceanic art, in the concealed dimensions hinted at by Rorschach tests, culminated in psychoanalysis. This,

with its emphasis on the irrational and perverse, on the significance of apparently free or random associations, its symbolism and whole concept of the unconscious, was a complete mythology of the psyche—moreover, a functional mythology which could be used for the systematic exploration of the inner reality of our lives.

Something of the ferment of ideas that existed by 1924, when Andre Breton issued the First Surrealist Manifesto, can be seen from both these histories. What seems particularly extraordinary is the sheer volume of activity, the endless stream of experimental magazines, pamphlets, exhibitions and congresses, films and bizarre frolics, as well as a substantial body of paintings and sculpture, all produced by a comparatively small group (far smaller, for example, than the number of writers in science fiction here and in the U.S.A.)

Equally, the movement is noted for the remarkable beauty of its women—Georgette Magritte, demure sphinx with the eyes of a tamed Mona Lisa; the peerless Meret Oppenheim, designer of the fur-lined cup and saucer; Dorothea Tanning, with her hieratic eyes; the mystic Leonora Carrington, painter of infinitely frail fantasies; and presiding above them all the madonna of Port Lligat, Gala Dali, ex-wife of the poet Paul Eluard, who described her before his death as the one "with the look that pierces walls." One could write a book, let alone a review, about these extraordinary creatures—nymphs of another planet, in your orisons be all my dreams remembered.

In so far as they have a direct bearing on the speculative fiction of the immediate future, the key documents of surrealism seem to me to be the following. Together they share an explicit preoccupation with the nature of that reality perceived by the inner eye, with our notions of identity and the metaphysics of our lives.

Chirico: *The Disquieting Muses.* An undefined anxiety has begun to spread across the deserted square. The symmetry and regularity of the arcades conceals an intense inner violence; this is the face of catatonic withdrawal. The space within this painting, like the intervals within the arcades, contains an oppressive negative time. The smooth, egg-shaped heads of the mannequins lack all features and

organs of sense, but instead are marked with cryptic signs. These mannequins are human beings from whom all transitional time has been eroded, they have been reduced to the essence of their own geometries.

Max Ernst: The Elephant of Celebes. A large cauldron with legs, sprouting a pipe that ends in a bull's head. A decapitated woman gestures towards it, but the elephant is gazing at the sky. High in the clouds, fishes are floating. Ernst's wise machine, hot cauldron of time and myth, is the tutelary deity of inner space, the benign minotaur of the labyrinth.

Magritte: The Annunciation. A rocky path leads among dusty olive trees. Suddenly a strange structure blocks our way. At first glance it seems to be some kind of pavilion. A white lattice hangs like a curtain over the dark façade. Two elongated chess-men stand to one side. Then we see that this is in no sense a pavilion where we may rest. This terrifying structure is a neuronic totem, its rounded and connected forms are a fragment of our own nervous systems, perhaps an insoluble code that contains the operating formulae for our own passage through time and space. The annunciation is that of a unique event, the first externalisation of a neural interval.

Dali: The Persistence of Memory. The empty beach with its fused sand is a symbol of utter psychic alienation, of a final stasis of the soul. Clock time here is no longer valid, the watches have begun to melt and drip. Even the embryo, symbol of secret growth and possibility, is drained and limp. These are the residues of a remembered moment of time. The most remarkable elements are the two rectilinear objects, formalisations of sections of the beach and sea. The displacement of these two images through time, and their marriage with our own four-dimensional continuum, has warped them into the rigid and unyielding structures of our own consciousness. Likewise, the rectilinear structures of our own conscious reality are warped elements from some placid and harmonious future.

Oscar Dominguez: Decalcomania. By crushing gouache Dominguez produced evocative landscapes of porous rocks, drowned seas and corals. These coded terrains are models of the organic landscapes enshrined in our central

nervous systems. Their closest equivalents in the outer world of reality are those to which we most respond—igneous rocks, dunes, drained deltas. Only these landscapes contain the psychological dimensions of nostalgia, memory and the emotions.

Ernst: *The Eye of Silence*. This spinal landscape, with its frenzied rocks towering into the air above the silent swamp, has attained an organic life more real than that of the solitary nymph sitting in the foreground. These rocks have the luminosity of organs freshly exposed to the light. The real landscapes of our world are seen for what they are—the palaces of flesh and bone that are the living façades enclosing our own subliminal consciousness.

The sensational elements in these paintings are merely a result of their use of the unfamiliar, their revelation of unexpected associations. If anything, surrealist painting has one dominant characteristic: a glassy isolation, as if all the objects in its landscapes had been drained of their emotional associations, the accretions of sentiment and common usage.

What they demonstrate conclusively is that our commonplace notions of reality—for example, the rooms we occupy, the rural and urban landscapes around us, the musculatures of our own bodies, the postures we assume—may have very different meanings by the time they reach the central nervous system. Conversely, the significance of the images projected from within the psyche may have no direct correlation at all to their apparent counterparts in the world outside us. This is commonplace enough as far as the more explicit symbols of the dream are concerned—the snakes, towers and mandalas whose identity Freud and Jung revealed. Surrealism, however, is the first systematic investigation of the significance of the most unsuspected aspects of both our inner and outer lives—the meaning, for example, of certain kinds of horizontal perspective, of curvilinear or soft forms as opposed to rectilinear ones, of the conjunction of two apparently unrelated postures.

The techniques of surrealism have a particular relevance at this moment, when the fictional elements in the world around us are multiplying to the point where it is almost impossible to distinguish between the "real" and the "false"

—the terms no longer have any meaning. The faces of public figures are projected at us as if out of some endless global pantomime, they and the events in the world at large have the conviction and reality of those depicted on giant advertisement hoardings. The task of the arts seems more and more to be that of isolating the few elements of reality from this mélange of fictions, not some metaphorical "reality," but simply the basic elements of cognition and posture that are the jigs and props of our consciousness.

Surrealism offers an ideal tool for exploring these ontological objectives: the meaning of time and space (for example, the particular significance of rectilinear forms in memory), of landscape and identity, the role of the senses and emotions within these frameworks. As Dali has remarked, after Freud's explorations within the psyche it is now the *outer* world which will have to be eroticised and quantified. The mimetising of past traumas and experiences, the discharging of fears and obsessions through states of landscape, architectural portraits of individuals—these more serious aspects of Dali's work illustrate some of the uses of surrealism. It offers a neutral zone or clearing house where the confused currencies of both the inner and outer worlds can be standardised against each other.

At the same time we should not forget the elements of magic and surprise that wait for us in this realm. In the words of Andre Breton: "The confidences of madmen: I would spend my life in provoking them. They are people of scrupulous honesty, whose innocence is only equalled by mine. Columbus had to sail with madmen to discover America."

LANDSCAPE WITHOUT TIME

James Colvin

THE CRYSTAL WORLD by J. G. Ballard (Cape, 21s) is in some ways his best novel to date in that it is almost certainly bound to appeal to an even wider audience than *The Drowned World* or *The Burning World*. This novel was serialised in a shorter version in NEW WORLDS Nos. 141-2

as *Equinox* and the full version is developed rather than padded. It is unlikely if anyone who read it then could forget the central images—the crystallising jewelled jungle, the man with the jewelled arm, the beasts with eyes that have turned to rubies—all symbolising the crystallisation of matter without time. The story, too, is fast-moving and has a more easily recognised shape than Ballard's previous novels. The images are strong and clear and as thoughtfully conceived as the images in the Max Ernst jacket that so marvellously complements the book. They are not the mere baroque decoration of some science fiction imagery; they, as much as anything else, serve to tell the story on their particular level.

Dr. Sanders arrives in Port Matarre, concerned with the fortunes of his friends who run a leper colony in the jungle. He discovers that the army is in charge of the locality, that some peculiar disaster has overtaken the area and parts of the jungle have been cordoned off. Ventress, a mysterious man Sanders has met on the boat, seems to know what is actually happening, but answers Sanders's questions cryptically. "There's no hurry here, doctor," he says. "This is a landscape without time."

Intent on discovering the exact nature of the peril and the fortunes of his friends up-river in Mont Royal, Sanders makes enquiries in Port Matarre. He meets a priest, full of some private obsession, who possesses a miraculously jewelled crucifix, and a girl journalist who is attracted to him. The body of a drowned man is brought ashore later, his arm "enclosed by . . . a mass of translucent crystals, through which the prismatic outlines of the hand and fingers could be seen in a dozen multi-coloured reflections. This huge jewelled gauntlet, like the coronation armour of a Spanish conquistador, was drying in the sun, its crystals beginning to emit a hard vivid light."

Sanders and the girl manage to get up-river and meet the officer commanding the troops stationed at Mont Royal who explains that a large area of the jungle has begun to crystallise. "Tatlin believes that this Hubble Effect, as they call it, is closer to a cancer than anything else—and about as curable—an actual proliferation of the sub-atomic identity of all matter. It's as if a sequence of displaced but identical images of the same object were being produced

by refraction through a prism, but with the element of time replacing the role of light."

For the rest of the book, Ballard investigates the various effects that the strange forest and its implications have on his characters. The pace at which the story moves, and with which new images are brought in, is rapid, but beautifully controlled. As with Conrad or Graham Greene, Ballard's characters are described more in terms of their moral qualities and inner lives than physical appearance or behaviour, but it is impossible to forget the moody Ventress, the leper girl with the leonine mask, the American-Swede who guards his dying wife in the old house in the jewelled jungle, Radek, crucified on a scintillating tree branch, or the illuminated man, with incandescent arms and chest, racing through the bizarre forest.

The Crystal World may be regarded as the last book in a trilogy which began with *The Drowned World* and in which Ballard has successfully developed and explored his chief obsessions with mankind's position in relation to space and time. Taken together, the three books represent a *tour de force* of imagination and intellect and undoubtably form a major contribution to post-war literature.

James Colvin

BRIEFER REVIEWS

PLAGUE FROM SPACE by Harry Harrison (Gollancz 18s) is the gripping story of a fatal and incurable plague coming originally from a returned spaceship. Well plotted, interestingly written, with believable characters, the book is a model sf novel of the threat-to-the-earth-in-the-near-future kind. Even the love story comes off. Especially impressive is the realistic behaviour of the characters in their situation. The average sf hero is amazed by any crisis, however predictable, panics, explains everything twice to everybody else, tells them not to panic, makes a plan, puts it into operation (pausing only for some weak graveyard humour and a tender passage with the heroine) and wins through in the end, never despairing and never really taking it all seriously. Mr. Harrison's very endearing character

accepts the situation rapidly, panics, despairs, rallies, does something, thinks of something else when it turns out wrong, gets desperate, pulls himself together and just makes it. Just like us all in fact. Many thanks.

Rick Raphael has been a professional journalist for twenty years and this shows in his writing in *Code Three* (Simon and Schuster, $3.95). He writes a plain, clear, precise unloaded style, well-suited to his subject—incidents in the working life of the two-man-and-a-girl team on a great cruising hospital patrol car and rescue vehicle designed to cover the vast highways, full of 600 mph cars, of the U.S.A. of the future. This is true science fiction—fiction about science rather than human beings. Mr. Raphael's imagination has gone mostly into creating the technology of the subject and it grips, even if the characters are 100 per cent Swedish fine cardboard.

Murder on the 31st Floor by Peter Wahloo (Michael Joseph, 21s) is a detective story set in the future. Someone is threatening the great combine which provides bromidic neutral reading for the public through its vast chain of magazines and papers. Who is it and—mystery two—who are the unknown workers on the never-mentioned 31st floor? The basic ideas aren't new, but the set-up in the huge publishing firm is handled well.

After three attempts at reading Poul Anderson's *Three Worlds to Conquer* (Mayflower, 3s 6d) one conscientious reviewer returned it saying it was incomprehensible. The editor of this magazine could not understand it either. This reviewer began it twice—at any rate they can't say we don't try!

Male dream, male nightmare, in Poul Anderson's very readable *Virgin Planet* (Mayflower, 3s 6d). One man lands on a planet of a quarter of a million women, descendants of a shipload of women wrecked 300 years before. The society has split off into various tribes ruled by a doctor-caste who arrange births by parthenogenesis. The plot is thin, depending on an attempt to capture the doctors' machine and destroy their dictatorship, but it rattles along full of battles, sexual encounters and booze-ups. As so much of female behaviour is determined by the fact that men exist, it seems a pity that Anderson has not stopped to wonder what women would really be like in a society

where there were no men. Would they really fight axe-wars? They probably have too much basic sense of their biological usefulness to fight physically, except over another man, where the motive is basically all in the same good cause of continuing the race. The race is to the strong, the battle to the brave and the victor to the prettiest girl—would amazons judge their looks in the same way when there were no men to appeal to? Would the girlish giggle and the spiteful quarrel exist? All questions the sf writer might well turn his attention to in a time of sexual transition, but not if it means sacrificing a good read like *Virgin Planet*.

The Eighth Galaxy Reader (Gollancz 21s) is a collection of slight, bright pieces, chiefly written, it appears, with the gas bill propped firmly in front of the typewriter. Most memorable, a sensitive story of a human-corrupted Mars by Wallace West; *If There Were No Benny Cemoli* by Philip K. Dick, in the strange and remote key favoured by this author; and a solid story of the search for human life outside Earth by Harry Harrison.

In three of his four stories of the future in *Time in Advance* (Panther, 3s 6d) William Tenn describes societies in which men live freed from the burdens of hate, irrationality, all kinds of conventional inhibition and the chains we load on our own intelligences. Well-plotted, often witty and very literate for sf, all four stories are a pleasure to read. The defect of the stories is that stories from the right-minded man's point of view (if we were suddenly superior creatures we wouldn't want to fight, it's never worth committing a murder, etc.) make for a note of high-thinking but plain writing. Tenn, like Swift, is more interesting among the Yahoos than the Houhynyms. This is where the first story in the book *Firewater* scores. Earth has been invaded by superior aliens, the best minds of Earth desert humanity and become arbitrary, careless, super-brilliant beatniks living out in the Arizona desert. Ordinary people are stirred up and furious. The impasse is solved by a crudely mercenary, intelligent businessman who breaks through to the aliens by a desperate psychic appeal to any capitalist among them. He finds his man and communication by means of trade begins. Here Tenn manages to make us believe in superior moral intelligences

and still steer clear of that rational, white-robed man with the ineffably pure face and all-forgiving smile who has been bobbing up via More, Butler, Wells and Huxley ever since Socrates's yes-men.

I Can't Sleep At Night (Whiting and Weaton, 21s) is a collection of thirteen ghost stories. They'll never equal those ghost stories written before writers themselves lost faith in the supernatural, before electricity, when houses with unexpected corners, lofts and cellars were everywhere and before they poisoned the cawing ravens with insecticides. Skilful stories by Bradbury, Bloch and Tenn, among others, but not strong enough to frighten anybody in 1966.

Hilary Bailey

FUNNY AND NOT SO FUNNY

IN MUCH THE same manner that a seasoned actor will shy away from appearing with children or animals, so will a seasoned sf writer tend to dissociate himself from attempting humour, though of course not for the same reasons. This sweeping generalisation naturally precludes the jewels of satire which enrich the genre; it's simply that it's hard to be funny in cold print. And in science fiction the difficulties are magnified and augmented by the inherent tendency for many of the traditional sf themes and settings, from little green men to out of control monsters, to be hilarious in their very being.

Every credit is therefore due to Dan Morgan whose second sf novel, *The Richest Corpse in Show Business* (Compact 3/6), has recently appeared. Here we find Harry Trevey, a producer with futuristic Amalgamated Television—they have flying micro cameras—in the unenviable position of having the star of his *Just Folks* series, Carmody Truelove, inconsiderately die at the height of the series' popularity. After several chapters which concern themselves with both Trevey's matrimonial difficulties and his attempts to research material for a Truelove testimonial programme, Trevey is left to find a new real-life folksie star around whom to build a new series. His alacrity

at persuading a licensed killer, a hunter, to play the lead is quickly tempered by the hunter's announcement that he, Trevey, will be the chosen victim, the hunt and actual killing of course to form the new *Just Folks* series. At which point in the novel the pace, which has never been slow, accelerates constantly, the result an enjoyable romp for the reader.

The most noticeable aspect of this book is that there is much which can be traced to other writers, the racy touches of Thorne Smith, the legalised Hunter-Victim situation of Sheckley's *Seventh Victim* and most definitely the fundamental setting which is uncomfortably too similar to Al Morgan's *The Great Man,* but the whole is welded together in a most forceful and commendable manner. Whilst Dan Morgan may not yet be a Frederic Brown or a Harry Harrison and whilst his characters are far thinner than cardboard, he is certainly able to control his humour, never allowing his writing to degenerate into a bathos of slapstick and often prodding his reader with exactly the correct touch of pure satire. There is present in this well-blended mélange a bright sparkle of originality and the result is an entertaining and *funny* book.

A second humorous novel to appear recently is the Penguin reprint of Pierre Boulle's *Monkey Planet* (3/6) which first appeared in this translation two years ago. The story which concerns itself with the discovery of a planet upon which apes are the dominant beings and upon which human life is at the same stage of development as are Terran apes is about as original in treatment as would be the Monday afternoon essay of a somewhat pathetic work from someone of M. Boulle's standing and capabilities. Possibly what is even more disappointing is that this reprint should appear under the Penguin colophon ; this is nowhere near the standard we have come to expect from this publishing house.

COMPACT BOOKS' LATEST 3/6d anthology, *Time Transfer*, is a collection of eleven stories by Arthur Sellings whose mature writing is often compared to that of Ray Bradbury or J. G. Ballard. It is true that some of the stories here do bear traces of similarity with these two modern poets. For example the title story, in which a group of men too old to

be of use to modern society is sent into the future, is one of overbearing nostalgia, whilst the plot of *From Up There*, in which a pleasant but somewhat confused alien finds that on earth people simply do not believe him for what he is, suffers from a rather weak trail-off ending.

To continue in the same vein and isolate the faults in the collection would, however, be most unfair, for they are indeed few. The parallel world story, *Escape Mechanism*, in which there is an eventual consolidation of the hero's delusional world, would have been a better and a far more forceful story had the ending been the opposite. The ending, too, also mars *Control Room*, here apparently having been included for the pre-adolescent segment of the author's readership, and this after an *excellent* description of the confusion in the minds of the alien visitors to earth who constantly misinterpret their findings in an entirely new environment. In *The Wordless Ones*, a long story of the vain attempts at contact and communication with a group of alien visitors by the earth authorities, the sardonic touches and twists are rather ruined by the over contriving of the developments (e.g., why is it so necessary for the hero to be holidaying in the mountains when the final acts of the drama are played out? For continuation of suspense? Or to keep the reader unaware of *all* the progression so that the end of the story will have its due impact?) so that on the whole the story tends rather to creak a little.

To make so much about the flaws in the paintwork when the foundations themselves are so sound is hardly justified without presenting a view of those foundations. *The Age of Kindness* is a well constructed character study of a complete misfit who eventually finds his—is it too glib a word?—salvation. *The Figment* is a neat fantasy story in which the author has drawn upon his experience as an antiquarian book dealer. *Jukebox* and *The Proxies* are both excellent stories in which the development is most logically carried through, the former being a story of other-world collectors, an old theme, here with a brand new difference, and the latter a problem story based upon Asimov's robotic laws. By the time this collection was three-quarters read I had formed the opinion that, despite the somewhat severe criticisms of the undoubted minor faults itemised above, the writings of Arthur Sellings are every word as good as their

laudation upon the collection's back cover. His writing is neat and definitely competent, the work of a man of ideas and of a stylist who does not let sheer verbosity obstruct the telling of a good story.

This was before I had read two of the last three stories in *Time Transfer*. In *Categorical Imperative*, a story far superior to those already mentioned, the picture of a world, in which the unemployment problem caused by the over abundance of robots is sardonically explored, is frightening. And the last story, *A Start in Life*, in which two robots are attempting to educate the last two surviving children, may be assessed to be as better than *Categorical Imperative* as is that story better than the other nine.

Yes, Arthur Sellings is a mature writer. And one well worth reading.

R. M. Bennett

THE NEW WHITING LIST

RONALD WHITING, GUEST of Honour at the recent SF Convention in Great Yarmouth, is a publisher with a serious and discriminating interest in science fiction. This is the impression he made at the convention, and this is the impression one receives from his new sf list. The presentation of the four titles he has so far published is about the best in the field. The jackets are tastefully designed and well printed and the whole effect shows that they are produced by a publisher with more than a passing commercial interest in what is today a safe-bet market. A publisher just starting up often finds it difficult to find good titles at first, due to longer-established publishers having had more time to cream off the best of the writers ; thus the new publisher often has to rely on relatively unknown writers in whom he believes and, in the sf field, on collections which others are unwilling to risk producing because there is a myth in the book trade that says the public don't like short story collections. This is not true of the science fiction public—but it seems the book trade is taking a long time to learn that.

The first four titles in the new Whiting list are *The Watch Below* by James White (18s), *No Man On Earth* by Walter Moudy (18s), *Science Fiction Showcase*, edited by Mary Kornbluth (21s), and *Star Fourteen*, edited by Frederik Pohl (21s). The full name of the publisher is Ronald Whiting and Wheaton. A forthcoming title will be William F. Temple's *Shoot at the Moon*, a novel that has already been received with almost unprecedented enthusiasm in publishing circles in Britain and America.

The Watch Below is by far the best novel James White has written to date. It is fresh in idea, skilful in construction and extremely well written, obeying few of the old U.S. magazine conventions with which too much sf (U.K. and U.S.) is still tainted. It is certainly the most original and, I should say, personal novel that Mr. White has done. During the second world war five people are trapped aboard an experimental tanker, *The Gulf Trader*, when it is sunk by a German submarine. By a fluke the trapped people discover they can stay alive in the sunken ship. Meanwhile, in space, a water-dwelling race heads for Earth with plans to colonise the oceans. Both sets of characters —alien and human—live in isolated, restricted worlds and both are forced into situations where they must use all their resources to stay alive. The mood of the story is claustrophobic and the atmosphere is absolutely convincing in both locations as, for several generations, the two groups face, solve or are changed by their separate problems before they at last meet. The dramatic possibilities of the two situations are cleverly and unsensationally exploited and, by drawing constant parallels between them, White involves the reader in as much understanding for the aliens as for the human beings so that when the climax arrives the reader has an equal interest in their fortunes. The psychological possibilities are not so fully exploited, but to do this thoroughly Mr. White would have needed to have written a much longer book, and, within the limits he has set himself, he manages to say some thoughtful things about human nature—certainly enough to give the book some depth, certainly enough to put it head and shoulders above the glib PLAYBOY-style clichés that pass for character analysis in too much modern sf. The novel has texture and shape and, for a change, comes up to the

jacket's claim that it is "one of the most original science fiction stories of the decade." Buy this one. You will want to read it more than once.

Also written with a feeling for the deeper realities of life is Walter Moudy's *No Man On Earth*, a first novel which lacks the skill of James White's book, but which has an atmosphere of its own because it is plainly written with passion. If it fails, it is because it tries too hard, producing overstatement and poor metaphors that often reduce essentially dramatic situations to bathos. The elements of the book are familiar ones—a social experiment on an isolated community that has returned to superstition, that has a belief in black magic and the like, a protagonist who is a superman of the van Vogt school, who embarks on a quest to discover who, where and what he is—but the writer, again, is not content to state the glib clichés and, because of this, the familiar elements are given something of a new lease of life. Moudy shows the potential of someone who, when he matures, might give us some good ones. He needs to improve his plot construction, use the language he has an evident feeling for, and at the same time look for more personal images that can be made into a science fiction story, rather than being content to manipulate the old arsenal of backgrounds and ideas. He has every chance of becoming an interesting and entertaining writer. If you still have a taste for science fiction of this type, you can be sure of an entertaining story equal, say, to an average novel by van Vogt or L. Ron Hubbard.

After Cyril Kornbluth died in 1958 twelve of his friends got together with his widow, Mary Kornbluth, to produce an anthology that would serve the double purpose of providing a memorial to the man and some money for his family. His friends gave their best work and the collection is one of the finest of its kind. Bradbury, Matheson, Blish, Dick, Sturgeon, Pohl, Leinster, Davidson, Williamson, Bloch, Knight and Anderson are the authors and many of the stories appear in this anthology for the first time in Britain. *Science Fiction Showcase* is an excellent anthology

to give to the reader not yet interested in science fiction. It is bound to convert him and bound to entertain you.

Star SF was the first of the "original" anthologies, operating in the same area as the sf magazines. It was a paperback anthology published by Ballantine Books in the U.S.A., a publisher with a fanatical interest in good sf. Because it paid better than the magazines it got the cream of the cream while it existed. Many of the very best sf short stories saw first publication there, and *Star Fourteen* is, if you like, the cream of the cream of the cream, since it is compiled from the best of the preceding volumes by the editor of the series, Frederik Pohl. The fourteen stories are by Gerald Kersh, Kornbluth, Bester, Elisabeth Mann Borgese, William Morrison, Bloch, Clarke, Kuttner, H. L. Gold, Gavin Hyde, Leiber, Matheson, Williamson and Bixby. Like *Science Fiction Showcase* it contains only the very best and is certain to make new converts. With only half its line-up *Star Fourteen* would have been too good to miss. It is highly recommended.

The four titles so far published by Whiting make a rare and excellent start to an sf list. Rumour has it that future titles will be even more exciting and we can be grateful that we now have a hardcover publisher in the field who is not only interested in sf, but is involved in it—is determined to encourage its development. That last quality is the most important one ; the one we've been waiting for.

Bill Barclay

SUBSCRIPTIONS AND BACK ISSUES

A few issues of NWSF Nos 142-159 (2/6 plus 6d per copy postage) are available from Back Issues Dept. Compact Books, 42-44 Dock Street, London, E.1. These contained stories by Brian Aldiss, J. G. Ballard, John Brunner, Arthur C. Clarke, James Colvin, Mack Reynolds, Robert Silverberg, Jack Vance, Roger Zelazny etc. etc. Issues from 160-163 are 3/6 plus 6d per copy postage.

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